

The DOME



Also by Lior Samson

Bashert

Web Games
(forthcoming)

The DOME

a novel by Lior Samson

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*To Devan, my multitalented son,
who keeps teaching an old dog new tricks.*



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Prologue

They were the Sage, the Wizard, and the Wonk. They had all agreed on the need to have code names, but when it came to the reality, or unreality, of assigning them, only the Sage had managed to keep a straight face. On Gmail they had become sage40, wizard423, and wonk88, the ultimate in undistinguished anonymity, anonymity multiplied, forty-fold or 423-fold or 88-fold, although they availed themselves of email only on the rarest of occasions, having established other more sophisticated channels of communication. When the Wonk chose his handle, the Wizard told him he had spent much too much time watching American TV. She would have preferred literary references: Pangolad, Asinoril, and Shimji, but the Sage had vetoed these for what he said were patently apparent reasons.

It was time, their final meeting. The Sage watched sweet-sour smoke from his cigar drifting up in a lopsided vortex as the door to his study opened. “So good of you to come,” he said to the Wizard, gesturing to the open chair opposite. “You know the Wonk, of course.” He was clearly having fun.

She laughed. “Yes, and so good to see you again, your Wonskship. And you are looking well, my Sage, my liege. As always.” She smiled, a careful and oddly pinched smile that narrowed her broad mouth.

The Sage, controlling the moment with his silence, nodded to her, took a short puff on his cigar, and pursed his thick lips while he studied the two of them, his invited intruders. The small, book-lined study, with its dark Oxonian paneling and immense wingback chairs, was his retreat from the world, his fallout shelter from what he had described in one of his many essays on the failings of the world as “the irrational radiation, the din that passed for discourse in the disorder of modern society.” It was a retreat reserved for him, his books, his cigars, and the more than occasional cognac. He rarely invited anyone into his sanctum sanctorum, but these two were exceptions. His opinions he would share without invitation with anyone in the street or on campus, his thoughts he broadcast on paper to the world, but it was only with these chosen few that he would confess the dark dreams that drove his ideas.

“Matters have become so depressing in your sliver of a country,” he said to the Wizard. “I must say I cannot fathom how or why you put up with it.”

“My adopted country,” she corrected. “We cope. Sometimes it is better, but sometimes, these times, it is worse. Perhaps we need a new vision.” She winked at him broadly.

“Vision is a euphemism of modern management for upper echelon proposals in the absence of plans,” he said in his best Alistair Cook voice. “It is such a limp word of vague voice, so cerebral and devoid of passion, don’t you think? Specification would be a preferable term. Or initiative, perhaps, which has the ring of intention about it. Wouldn’t you agree?” He had

the sublimely civil but domineering manner of a lifelong academic, a man used to intimidating students and other lesser beings, one who expected to be challenged but never to be wrong.

The Wonk, his junior in both years and position, started to say something, but the Sage continued, as if not wanting a meticulously planned introductory lecture interrupted prematurely by some overeager young student. “We,” he said with a sweep of his head, “could be the beginning of a change in the course of history. We can offer an opportunity for changing the conversation, for injecting a new subtext into the historic narrative. Please, no visions for me. The time for vision ended with the second intifada. Now is the time for initiative, initiative undergirded by intelligence and discipline.” Even now, here, with his closest confidants, he indulged his penchant for pedantry.

His guests both nodded, although the Wizard struggled to suppress a smirk. She had always been amused by his posturing, which had no doubt contributed to both the heat of their early ardor as well as the chill of their later falling out. He sent her a disapproving look, then picked up the newspaper from beside his chair and laid it on the glass-top table, open to inside-page headlines about the latest wave of violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

“These times, yes. I am sure you know the story already, all too well. This particular time,” he said, tapping on a photo, “it was yet another round of tit-for-tat destruction, with homes in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank shelled by rocket-propelled grenades following the bulldozing of two Palestinian houses alleged to have belonged to relatives of a 16-year-old martyr, a suicide bomber who had, in her pious but ignorant ineptitude, managed to kill herself while only

injuring the right-wing rabbi who was, so it is surmised, her target.

“Of course, there was what our American colleagues prefer to euphemize as ‘collateral damage,’ in this instance seven students from a Greek tour group who picked the wrong day to visit local synagogues. The attack on the rabbi was, in turn, preceded by the killing of a mullah by mercenaries supposedly, if we are to believe Hamas, in the pay of the Israeli intelligence services.

“Does no one do their own dirty work anymore? Are all fights by proxy? Has impersonal Semtex replaced the assassin’s intimately personal shiv?” He took another puff on his cigar, clearly enjoying his rhetorical rant. “All this, of course, consequent to the September riots over new restrictions on access to the attractions,” he said, spitting out the word, “on the Temple Mount. The sacred Temple Mount—sacred to the Jews, to Islam, and to Christendom. So we kill each other over it, that it may once again be the cause and sometime site for blood sacrifice. And where does it stop? When do they learn, these benighted barbarian bigots?” No one spoke as he savored his own alliterative outburst, smiling and squinting one eye slightly as though he might be considering a revision to a line in a book manuscript.

“I still do not see,” he continued, “how anyone as intelligent and rational as you could bear to live and work in a theocracy, a country dominated by dark-age denizens like the *haredim*. The orthodox right even call the shots on who is a Jew and who a gentile, who may return and who may not.”

The Wizard chewed her lip before speaking. “I work with intelligent and rational people on fast and powerful computers. The ultraorthodox are not much of a factor in our everyday lives.”

“Yet they reap even though they do not sow. Their scholars live off the labors of others while holding an entire nation hostage to their archaic standards. But,” he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, “These are obsolescent political and religious matters, that I would hope would soon be utterly obsolete, a hope I have held for what begins to seem like a lifetime.

“I do believe that the Middle East needs more than vision or hope, it needs action of a new order. It is a system, a perpetual motion machine, a self-feeding cycle of death and destruction.”

The others nodded with him, slowly and sadly, at first. But they also recognized one of his favorite words and, as they sensed what was coming next, amused smiles spread on their faces.

“Systems, yes,” he said. “And who better understands systems? Here we are, if you will forgive my immodesty, three of the most gifted people on the planet—a wizard, a wonk, and a sage—experts on science and politics and political science, and most of all, on systems. It is past time that the likes of us should put our minds to the task of what might be done, the course of action to a new course, an initiative.” Now both of his companions, amused by his all too familiar grandiosity, were grinning. Pushing aside the newspaper, he placed three large snifters on the table between them and started to pour from a decanter.

The Wonk waved a dark hand over the nearest glass. “Thank you, no. You know that we...we don’t imbibe.”

“Ah, yes, of course. How quaint. Laudable, I suppose, but still quaint.” He finished pouring the other two glasses and raised his. “So, then, let us toast to our little political science project, our...our initiative.”

Their gathering at last shifted from monologue to dialogue, and the discussion quickly picked up in pace, ranging widely over many details and no few digressions—on the surface, a medley of intellectual debates, an academic pursuit, but with a smoldering subtext that crackled like static electricity. They talked of finances and logistics, of facilities and personnel, of responsibilities and communication. They reviewed the research already completed and the projects newly funded. They argued over technology and tactics. They highlighted the holes in their insight and expertise and talked of where and from whom and how they might secure what they needed. They reviewed and reiterated until all the issues had been laid bare, the action items had been identified, their ownership designated, and the whole had been committed to memory, since the Sage had declared there would be no notes from their meetings.

It was already early morning hours when the Wizard and the Wonk finally took their leave. The Sage, without rising, looked up at as they stood to go. “You seem, perhaps, reticent, shall we say,” he said, looking at the Wizard.

She looked back at him, lips pursed, uncertainty in her eyes. “No, I am with you. I think it is both needed and righteous, if I may be permitted to use such a word. But it is my country, my family, even if I am an adopted child, and I cannot deny my mixed feelings. Nevertheless, that will not keep me from doing my part.”

The Sage raised his glass. “All right then, we have our work ahead. I trust you both can see yourselves out. But first, what is it the Jews say? Next year in Jerusalem? So be it, indeed. Next year in Jerusalem. Ah, yes, and that other perennial favorite of modern Israelites, a promise so often invoked even if so seldom kept. Never again!”

His guests long gone, the Sage sat alone in the silence of the study, swirling the last drops of cognac in the bottom of his glass. So much beauty in the world, he thought. He closed his eyes and pictured the cliffs at Ga'ash in Israel, remembering the brilliant light, the on-shore wind steady and strong, and in the sky, a lone kite, climbing and climbing toward the sun, toward the light. I must return. I will. Next year in Jerusalem. Indeed, so much beauty. But also so much ugly stupidity as well. But we shall see what can be done about some piece of that.

Part One

1

The warehouse smelled of machine oil and rain and mold-rotted cardboard. Miserly light from the street filtered through dirt-clouded windows and glistened off greasy pools of water on the heavily stained concrete floor. Hamadi el-Masri, dressed in jeans and a bomber jacket, paced in long-legged strides as they talked. His thick beard had been trimmed in the close-clipped style of the younger men in his employ so that he might stand out less as he crisscrossed the continent and closed deals with infidels. The ropy scar on his chin where an Israeli bullet had grazed him as a boy was uncovered. Instead of the pride he had felt at the time, now it made him feel exposed and irrationally vulnerable.

He hated the fat, pale men he was dealing with as much as they hated him, but business was business. The asking price was too high, but it was worth something to get so much from one source, and Hamadi knew they were running out of time and options. Besides, the money was not his money, though some part of it would become his. It was more money than he had ever known, yet still, he was not tempted by it as others

were and would be. To him, it was only a means to an end, a greater end: the Sword of the Prophet. He closed the deal with a nod of his head.

“We cannot take care of delivery, of course,” the Colonel told him. “The transport you will have to arrange. But you can pick up the material tomorrow night, if you are ready. The warehouse will be guarded by our people and two of my men will be at the border. There will be no trouble. After that, it’s your affair.”

“Delivery, transport, these are no problem,” Hamadi answered with noticeable impatience. “There is never a shortage of mules. Just be sure it is all in small enough packages as was specified.”

“Why must you complicate things? Do you realize what it involves to repackage that stuff? It is not like dividing up soap powder. No, we do not have the time, and I really do not want to put my men at risk.”

“That’s the deal, Colonel Glinkov. You are already being well compensated. We need packets that can be slipped under a burqa or into a backpack, not barrels that require a truck. You have the people and equipment that can handle it. Half kilogram packages, sealed, wrapped in lead foil, triple bagged and taped. Understood?”

“*Da, da*. Understood. *Paka*. Later my friend.”

I am not your damn friend, Hamadi thought as he turned away without responding.

By the next night, the rain had turned to light snow, and a palette stacked with neat, plastic-wrapped packets waited for Hamadi on the loading platform. Hamadi jumped nimbly out of the panel truck, ran around, and hopped up onto the concrete platform, while his driver, a skinny young man from a mostly Muslim enclave just over the border, finished backing

up. The panel truck jolted to a stop just short of the tailboard and the driver started to step out of the cab. Hamadi took one look at the palette and waved the approaching driver back into the truck. In clumsy Russian he told the two guards standing near the palette to get the goods loaded quickly, before they attracted attention. The guards looked dumbly at each other but otherwise made no move.

“Doesn’t Glinkov maintain any discipline?” Hamadi said.

“Ah, English. Better. Discipline? Yes. But we are not stevedores. Load it yourself.”

Hamadi looked again at the tiers of nearly identical packets and shook his head. “Glinkov will not be pleased if he learns that we drove off without the shipment. He will want the rest of his fee. And it is not like there are many markets in which to sell goods such as these—at any price. I think you would be wise to load them now.” He started back toward the front of the truck. The two men sighed and began heaving the packets casually onto the floor in the back.

Hamadi’s driver scowled at him. “What was that about? We could have loaded the stuff.”

“Sure, if we wanted to die young, which has never been my plan nor should it be yours. You must attend to small details. There was powder on the outside of some of the packets. They were careless packing the material. Their mistake. Let them pay the penalty.”

The driver nodded knowingly as he watched in his rearview mirror.

Too bad for the mules, though, Hamadi thought. But mules are mules, and we are all *jihadi*. Each must contribute as he can.

After they finished loading, one of the guards came around to the open window and held out his hand. “Good luck,” he

said. Hamadi looked down at the man's hand, rolled up the window, and signaled to his driver to pull out. The guard thrust his middle finger in the air and cursed him loudly in Bulgarian.

Pity, thought Hamadi as they rolled out into the night heading toward the frontier. He pulled out his smartphone and brought up a calendar. The agreed delivery date was creeping up on them quickly, but they would make it to the boats and then get it to the mules who would smuggle it the final leg to where it was needed, where it would be prepared for use, where it would become the Sword of the Prophet. He checked to see that there was enough signal, then expertly thumbed a three-word text message: 7-666-99 666-66 2-555-555. He sent it, then shut off the phone and swapped out the SIM card for a new one. The old one he snapped in two and tossed out the window into the snow. Track that, he thought.

2

Karl Lustig, a bit winded from the run up the switchback trail from the beach at Ga'ash, worked to control his breathing. Now, he thought, that is a true sign of getting old. When you start to cover up being out of breath after running uphill, you are on your way downhill. When you cover up and there is no one even around to notice, you are already old. No, he protested in a silent shout. Not old, he mentally chided himself, not yet. *Older* perhaps, as in older Americans, that wonderful euphemism of sociologists and the welfare state of my homeland. Older than who? Older than me. As for me, I for one am sure not ready to hang up my running shoes, no way. With all these new responsibilities, retirement is not even in my vocabulary. I had better stay young. And in shape.

Karl still found his circumstances surprising. After decades of suitcase living and singlehood, he was finally settled down, but neither as nor where he could ever have imagined. A part of him would always see himself as a small-town boy uprooted from the upper mid-west by college and circumstances. His

four years at MIT had forever changed his view of the world, which had almost overnight become so much larger, populated not only with amazing and diverse people, but jammed with wondrous boxes of blinking lights and glowing tubes that did the bidding of anyone with knowledge of the secret languages by which they were commanded. He had been seduced by their flashing indicators and their phosphorescent displays into a career as a computer consultant. And then, on one consulting trip to Germany, his peripatetic but comfortable life had been derailed by a collision with an old friend from MIT, another transplanted mid-westerner who was, it turned out, manipulating strings behind the scene that would ultimately pull Karl to Israel and to a new life—a settled life with a wife and family that would find him progressively less and less of a consultant and ever more of a commentator.

Now, he turned to wave back to his stepson and his wife—his pregnant wife—both still playing on the beach. He looked around for just the right spot on the grassy edge of the cliff from which to sit and watch them as they maneuvered the enormous blue-and-white kite that twisted and turned above the sand and rocks and waves. So beautiful, he thought, so beautiful, both of them. My Shira, my Binyamin. Their long shadows in the late afternoon sun danced across the beach that stretched away below him in both directions. The weather was too cool and windy now for a swim or for sunbathing, and the young gays playing beach volleyball were gone, but with a steady on-shore wind against its dramatic cliffs, Ga'ash was a perfect spot for sailing a kite or for hang-gliding off the cliffs or for sitting and watching the kites and the hang-gliders and the watchers.

It also seemed the perfect place to spend the last day before Karl had to leave for a conference in Boston. He smiled to

himself, thinking back to the first time Shira had brought him to Ga'ash beach. They had been playing hooky from work while Bini was in school. On a whim they had turned it into a morning of swimming and sunning and stealing kisses and caresses before hurrying back to the apartment to make love ahead of Bini's return from school. And now Bini was studying for his bar mitzvah. It had been another day, like this one, that he would gladly have stretched from mere hours into languorous days. But Karl, now as then, had responsibilities waiting in Boston. Although he still often referred to Boston as "back home," and usually relished each return visit on business, in his heart, Israel had become his real home, or at least that stretch of it from Haifa down to Tel Aviv that spanned his regular beat as a columnist and a blogger writing on the events and arcana of Israel's whirlwind high-tech world.

Amidst the kites and the hang gliders, Karl noticed another shape, a brilliant yellow cross carving a lazy spiral against the blue and silver of the sky. At first he thought it was a full-sized glider, but then realized it was an exceptionally large radio-controlled model. He looked around for someone holding a little box with joysticks and a jutting antenna, but the only technology in sight was in the hands of an older gentleman sitting in a car across the road with the passenger door propped open, plunking away on a laptop computer.

What a shame, Karl thought, to waste a day such as this sitting in your car answering email or surfing the Web. There was something odd, though, about the man's intermittent two-finger typing and the way he kept crouching over to squint at the laptop screen, then leaning out to check the sky. Tall and distinguished, he sat half in and half out of the tiny gray Fiat that confined him like a cage. He seemed as much interested in

something above him as in the computer in his lap. Finally, Karl made the connection: computer control. From the pacing of the actions on the computer, he surmised that the glider must be semi-autonomous, rather than directly controlled, that the man with the laptop was apparently sending it only general commands.

Now that is way cool, Karl thought, smiling and nodding in the direction of the car. For a moment, just a moment, the man paused and looked toward Karl but then turned quickly back to his business with the laptop.

The radio-controlled glider spiraled slowly and seductively skyward on the updraft off the cliffs, drawing the eye and silently calling to the watcher to follow, until, for a moment, it seemed to pause and sit in the air. Without warning, it nose-dived, dragging something behind it. The glider had tangled with the unseen string of a high-flying kite. The man at the laptop tapped madly at the keyboard, but there was nothing that could be done. The once-graceful glider tumbled and corkscrewed awkwardly before crashing onto the rocks at the edge of the shore. Onlookers on the beach rushed to the site of the crash as the man in the car, without hesitating so much as a moment, closed his laptop, extricated himself from his automotive cage, and walked briskly around to get into the driver's seat before quickly driving off.

How odd, thought Karl, just as Bini came running up from the beach. "Did you see that, Abba Karl? That was sick! Just awesome! It just went whang and then like this." He demonstrated with his hands. "Did you see it? Awesome. It hit the beach like a bomb. Pffloom. Like a bomb. See, I got a piece of it." He proudly held up a broken circuit board from the radio-control system or the on-board computer. "Is that sick, or what!"

Bini turned and scrambled back down toward his mother, shouting and waving his souvenir. Shira, her dark hair tousled by the wind, smiled up at Karl. Such love in her eyes, Karl thought.

3

The two young women in their fashionably scuffed jeans talked quietly as they moved slowly with the crowd of the pious and the curious. The heat of the midmorning sun bounced off ancient stone and beat upon them from every quarter. They were immersed in a rich stew of sound, a jumble of languages and agendas, and, at a distance, a potpourri of muffled pleas and prayers.

Clarissa Hargrove, wishing she were not so tall, not so pale, not so glaringly a touring student on break, bent down to her traveling companion and said in a half-whisper, “Tell me again why we are here, Josie? I’m not Jewish. You’re not Jewish. So why are we going to the Wailing Wall?” Clarissa had a history of following her friend’s lead until they were in the thick of something, at or near the point of no return, only then to start questioning or voicing uncertainty about the virtues of their venture.

Josie pushed back a wayward strand of her mahogany hair and smiled up at her friend. “Who knows,” she said, shrugging her shoulders dramatically. “Most Portuguese have some

Jewish blood in them, you know.” She was Clarissa’s physical and emotional opposite: pretty, petite, quick-tempered. The two were joined by bonds of mutual envy, the one wishing she were taller, more elegant, more controlled, the other wanting to be smaller, cuter, more spontaneous.

Clarissa wiggled her shoulders awkwardly, as if shrugging off some uncomfortable piece of clothing. “I thought your family was Spanish. Mexican. What do you Americans say? Hispanic? Latinos?”

“Mafalda José Castanheira Pereira. Portuguese.” She said dramatically, pronouncing each syllable with a careful continental accent, rolling her R’s and buzzing the soft consonant at the start of her second name. A silent tremor of laughter rippled through her small frame as she finished with a slight curtsy and a nod.

“Mafalda José? What kind of a name is that? I mean, I thought your name was Josie. Isn’t José, like, I mean, it sounds like a boy’s name?”

“Well, yes, but that’s the way it is with the Portuguese. My father’s name was José Duarte. His family was from Madeira, see. So I go by Josie because my first name is just too weird, and it’s a drag to keep explaining why a girl would have a boy’s name. Besides, in the States they always pronounce it wrong when they read it. Ho-zay. Yuk. Like if it was Spanish. At least your parents gave you a solidly mainstream name. Anyway, Pereira is a pretty strong clue. Back in the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese Jews were forced to convert, many took the names of trees for their Christianized surnames. Pereira, pear tree. My mom’s maiden name was Castanheira. Chestnut tree. See? Both sides.”

“I never knew. And Mafalda? Where is that from, what does that mean?”

“It means my mother was a cruel bitch. Not.” She paused for effect. “No, I think it was the name of a Portuguese princess, but I don’t know if it means anything. My parents always say it’s such a beautiful name. Go figure. Anyway, we are not Jewish, but the family might have been, five centuries back. We are nominally Catholic on both sides, although my dad has never attended Mass, and my mom rejected the papal bullshit when she was just a girl. She said that a loving God would never condemn unbaptized babies to hell or purgatory. Of course, now the Pope has declared there is no purgatory. Popes are imperfect and fallible, my mother would say. They change their minds and contradict themselves and each other, she would add, compounding her blasphemy. And you know me. I waffle between atheism and animism, depending on the time of the month. But I still want to leave a prayer in the wall for my great grandmother. I never knew her, but people say I look like her, and the family story, unconfirmed, is that she converted in order to marry into our family. So I asked Tovah—you know, that girl from poli-sci class—to write out a prayer that I could tuck into the wall in her honor. So I guess, nominally, officially, or maybe unofficially, maybe I am Jewish, that is. A Jewish grandmother, you know, that counts. So great grandmother must be almost as good. And here we are in Jerusalem and on our way to the Wailing Wall.

“After that, let’s go around and up to see the Temple Mount itself and the Dome of the Rock. I understand it is really awesome. Isn’t it ironic? Jews were here long before Mohammed launched Islam, but they are left with the rocky ruins of one fragment of their temple while the Muslims have this magnificent mosque right on top. The Jews pray in the ruins below while their Muslim brothers worship in splendor above. If you want to know what I think,...

She was interrupted by a sound like microwave popcorn just beginning to pop: brief, irregular bursts, sharp but muffled. Josie, standing on tiptoes in the hope of seeing what was happening, faced toward the popping sound, which stopped even as she turned. She listened for a moment, as did others in the crowd, then said, “What was that? Did you hear that?” Clarissa didn’t answer, and when Josie turned back, she didn’t see her at first. Instead she noticed a small knot of people kneeling around something on the ground.



Harold Timothy was an unlikely archeologist. For one thing, Indian Jones had spoiled it for the entire profession by so becoming the unconscious archetype in the public mind that almost everyone told Harold he simply did not look the part. Small-boned and soft-spoken, with a perpetually adolescent face, he had often been told that he looked more like a med student on some television daytime drama than like a biblical archeologist. Indeed, he had started out to be a medical missionary, but fortuitously fell under the spell of ancient artifacts in an elective class on biblical archeology while he was still in pre-med at a small Christian college in Arkansas. He had finished his medical degree out of a sense of duty reinforced by the pull of an all-expenses scholarship, then started working at a tiny rural church-run hospital in the Philippines until, on learning in 2001 that missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham had been abducted from nearby by a group of Abu Sayyaf terrorists, he began to doubt whether he had been truly called. When he learned of Martin Burnham’s death in a botched rescue raid, he discovered both the limits of his own faith and courage and the depth of his scholarly passions. He returned to graduate school, started doing field

research in the Holy Land, and, drawing on his boyhood experiences spelunking in southern caves, had become a respected leader of subterranean expeditions.

The archeology beneath Jerusalem's Old City was going well. Harold and his students from the Biblical Field Research Center were becoming adept with the little semi-autonomous robots that were now the mainstay of his field work. He had been skeptical at first, after an anonymous donor had sent several of the little tracked vehicles to his department, but they were proving to be a true godsend, enabling his team to study unexplored and once unreachable parts of ancient sewers and cellars without having to launch any major excavation. The robots could squeeze through openings too small for even the slimmest and most agile young archeology student and could enter spaces unsafe for any human being. They could photograph markings on the wall in infrared and ultraviolet as well as in visible light. If they found an interesting artifact, they could scan it *in situ* with a laser to create a computer file that could later be downloaded to a computer-controlled tool in the lab back at the Research Center in Arkansas, producing an exact three-dimensional replica in plastic without ever having touched the original.

The robots did the dirty work while Harold and his two student archeologists sat in air-conditioned comfort in their all-white minivan, studying their screens and maps and working the controls of their robotic assistants. Technology was helping them in their field research, in their analysis, even in sharing the data. Their maps and images and findings were uploaded by satellite link almost as soon as they were available in the mobile control center. An unexpected uptick in generous donations from wealthy conservatives had transformed Harold's lab into a showcase for modern high-tech archeology.

He smiled to think of his strictly secular colleagues struggling for meager government grants when he had money and equipment raining down on him, unasked, like manna before the Israelites in the desert.

Robots are so much better than grad students, Harold thought, glancing over to the third robot in the corner, the one they kept as a spare. Like the others, it had an articulated camera head and a double-jointed arm atop a chassis with two pairs of tank-like treads. The chassis could bend on two axes to get over or around most anything. The robot could climb stairs or lower itself by cable into a cistern. It was even rather cute in a mechanical sort of way. Of course, live graduate students had other things to offer in the field, particularly the young Canadian, Gillian Walkenberg, on whom Harold had set his sights from the first time he had interviewed her by video conference. Nothing had happened yet, but the semester was only half over. He was not sure of the depth of her commitment to Christ, but then, he was not sure of his own, either.

“We’ve lost Shadrach,” Chris Barrone, the younger of his two students, said, pointing at one of the screens on the operator console before adding, “again.” He pushed back a shock of his shoulder-length blonde hair as he turned to Harold with a pleading expression on his face. Harold grudgingly tolerated the young man’s ambiguous sexuality, in part because it meant less competition. Hate the sin, but love the sinner. That was the credo that Harold struggled to live up to and that he hoped would be applied to himself, sinner that he was and sinner that he longed to be.

Harold squeezed past Gillian, savoring the press of her shoulder and the heady scent of her hair, and sat down beside Chris, who was jiggling a joystick and punching buttons in

front of an all-blue monitor screen displaying a flashing legend: No Signal, No Signal.

“He disconnected from the umbilical, shifted into local wi-fi mode, and started down a side tunnel. Then the feed went blank.” Chris twisted a dial and punched a couple of buttons half-heartedly before continuing. “He does this, goes off on his own for awhile, then comes back, plugs into the umbilical again, and behaves himself for the rest of the mission. We checked him over and can’t find anything wrong with him or with his programs. He just takes off sometimes. Meshach never acts up, at least so far. We’ve tried to find out what Shadrach does and where he goes when he’s off on these little jaunts, but the onboard camera and event recorders also cut off, so we get nothing when we take a dump.

“But you know what really frosts me? Look at that,” he said, pointing to a flickering yellow-green light in one corner of the console. “That’s disk activity, just as if we were getting a normal feed and the raw data were being written to the hard drive. Except right now there’s no feed as far as we can tell, and at the end of the day, we can’t find anything in the folder for Shadrach or anywhere else for the time while he is AWOL. Weird stuff, like poltergeists.”

Harold scowled. “No such thing. I’ll not have my students blaming imaginary forces or invoking magical thinking to explain what are just technical failures. Nor are such beliefs acceptable to good young Christians. Did you ever try to follow him with Meshach to see what he’s up to? That is what a scientist would do.”

Duly chastised, Chris went on the defensive. “Easier said than done. It’s a stretch to control two of them at once, so we started running only one robot at a time, and by the time we could get Meshach or Abednego booted up and lowered down

the well, Shadrach would be back among the living. The times we have used the robots in tandem, Shadrach was as good as gold.”

“Well, if this keeps up, let’s start running two at once as often as we can. Or don’t use Shadrach as the primary. We do have three robots.”

“But, Shadrack is bigger. He has the longer arm and the tool changer, plus a much bigger battery for when he’s off the umbilical.”

“Figure it out,” Harold said. “We can’t afford to have blanks in the record. Or to lose a robot.” He glanced out of the windscreen of the van just in time to catch a glimpse of the red star and flashing light on the back of a *Magen David Adom* motorcycle speeding past on the narrow street. The Red Shield first responders were famous for being quick on the scene, and the motorcycles meant they could get almost anywhere in the Old City.

“Someone must be hurt,” he said, as he climbed past Gillian again to squeeze into the front passenger seat. “I’ll go check it out.” He grabbed the emergency medical kit from under the seat before pushing open the door and starting out at a trot after the motorcycle.