

THE
ATLAS
AGENDA

The Atlas Agenda

Peter R.M. Debik M.A.

First Edition

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PROLOGUE

“What happens when the last person forgets?”

The girl sat cross-legged in the dust, eyes wide with serious wonder. She had made a crown of copper wire and paper scraps. Her dress had been stitched too many times to still be new. Her voice had the clarity of someone who had never yet been lied to.

The boy was a few years younger, but tonight he didn’t feel it. Not with the sky purpleing and the wind soft like a lullaby. He leaned back on his elbows, staring up at the stars that flickered faintly behind the haze of towerlight.

“Then,” he said, “the lie becomes true.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No. But it works.”

She frowned.

“Why do they make people forget?”

“Because memory hurts. Because history accuses.”

“But isn’t memory... sacred?”

“It used to be.”

“Like God?”

He turned his head to look at her.

“Like the part of God we carry without knowing.”

She picked up a small mechanical bird from the dust beside her. Its gears were stiff, one wing cracked. She wound it carefully.

“Do you think the song will still work?”

“Only if it remembers itself.”

The bird ticked once. Twice.

Then sang.

A thin, trembling melody spilled into the warm air. It sounded older than the buildings. Older than them both. The kind of song that doesn't begin, but returns.

She listened. Not moving.

"What is it called?"

"It doesn't have a name anymore."

"But it's beautiful."

"So was the world," he said.

"Did we forget it?"

"No," he said. "We were taught not to ask where it went."

She looked down at the bird, still singing. Its eyes were made of glass. The metal of its wings shimmered like old brass coins.

"If I keep the song, will I remember?"

"Maybe."

"Will you?"

He didn't answer right away.

Then:

"I think one day I'll forget you. And this. And why it mattered."

"That's sad."

"Yes."

"But you'll still carry it," she said.

"How?"

She reached out and tapped her fingers gently against his chest.

"There."

The bird's song wound down. A final note lingered, too thin to hold.

The city beyond them pulsed with light and forgetting.

"Will we stay together when the forgetting comes?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I'll wait for you," she said.

"Where?"

"Where the songs are kept. Where the memories sleep."

She paused. Then added:

"Even if I have to guard them alone."

The boy looked at her. And he knew—without knowing why—that she would.

“And what if I try to break the silence?”

“Then I’ll try to stop you.”

“Even if it’s me?”

“Especially if it’s you.”

She wasn’t smiling anymore.

She looked to the horizon. The towers shimmered with the light of machines already dreaming of erasure.

“We’ll forget this, won’t we?” she asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Then promise me one thing.”

“What?”

She held up the songbird, now silent.

“If you ever hear this again... listen.”

“And if I don’t remember you?”

She smiled, just a little.

“Then I’ll forgive you.”

And somewhere in the sky, something older than either of them listened.

Not God.

Not quite.

Just memory, old and patient.

Waiting to return.

Chapter I

MARRAKESH

The wind smelled of rose oil and old copper. Marrakesh was exhaling again.

Al-Khafi walked slowly through the bazaar, hands in his coat pockets, boots silent on the cracked stone beneath him. He looked like a man without urgency—a poet maybe, or someone between appointments. But beneath the stillness, his pulse was measured. Every corner of his attention was working.

He felt the city the way an old clockmaker feels the tick behind the ticking.

The souk buzzed with layers—grinding trams overhead, oil-lamps sputtering with hissed breath, the click of metal limbs on market carts, vendors shouting half-truths about perfumes and powered teeth-whiteners and memory-tonics that “reverse heartbreak.” Children darted between stalls with goggles too large for them strapped to their faces and gears stuck in their hair. Steam coiled from rooftop vents, mingling with the call to prayer, with the dust, with the smell of almond pastry and fuel.

He loved this place. Or had once. Or maybe he loved who he used to be when he still belonged here. The souk had taught him everything long before any handler or agency tried to shape him. How to move without drawing attention. How to vanish in steam and noise. How to lie convincingly with his eyes while his hands stole something back for someone else. But more than that it taught him how to feel the truth beneath the surface of things.

Somewhere ahead, a voice rose in song.

Low at first, then strong, cutting through the clatter of market bells and haggling voices like light through dust. A woman sang,

old and unhurried, perched beside a display of silk dye jars. Her voice carried a melody no broadcast station would archive.

It was a Marrakeshi love song, half-lullaby, half lament.

“YOU KISSED ME ONCE BENEATH THE OLIVE TREE
WHEN NAMES STILL MEANT SOMETHING, AND THE SKY HAD SHAPE.
I’VE FORGOTTEN THE TUNE, BUT NOT THE ACHE.”

A few vendors hummed along. One old man wiped at his eyes, not with sorrow, but recognition.

It was the kind of song that didn’t belong in this era.

But refused to leave it.

But the city had changed. Quieter in the wrong ways, louder in the wrong places. And something watched from beneath the surface, like a clock wound too tight.

Everyone here was pretending. Selling. Bargaining. Deceiving. But no one hid it. The man selling cinnamon bark knew you knew it was sawdust. The boy hawking antique lenses knew they were fakes. That was the dance. And if you played it well, you were respected. Not trusted, but understood.

There was comfort in that kind of honesty. Everywhere else in the world, people lied and called it diplomacy. Here, they lied and called it trade. He preferred the latter.

The souk didn’t care who you were—only what you brought to the table. It asked for no confession. It recorded no past. If you returned after ten years, it wouldn’t remember your name. But it would remember your rhythm, the pace of your walk, the way you touched the produce to check for bruises. It knew people by the shape of their shadows.

Al-Khafi liked that. He didn’t belong to many things. Not anymore. But he still belonged to the pulse of this place.

He paused at the edge of a spice stall where a small brass cage hung from a hook, catching slanted beams of sunlight. Inside, an artificial songbird sat motionless. It wasn’t new. The metal was

tarnished. One wing quivered with a faint fault in the gearing. But the moment he stepped closer, the mechanism stirred.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Like a heartbeat.

He looked at the vendor, who gave him a barely perceptible nod. Al-Khafi slipped the bird from its perch and into his coat.

These birds weren't made anymore. Too delicate. Too evocative. In an age where memory was controlled, a song that no longer existed in the official archive was a dangerous thing. This one, especially. It sang the same Marrakeshi love song he heard minutes ago. One that no outsider would know. And no native would forget. Coincidental?

Once, it had been a lullaby.

Then a hymn.

Then an act of treason.

He moved through the souk.

"Eight paces back," he murmured, barely moving his lips, "pausing on the fourth. Not local."

The tail had picked him up near Bab Doukkala. Sloppy. New.

He smiled faintly and dipped into a spice vendor's shadow. The man behind the cart was old and mostly blind. Still, he passed a folded piece of cloth across the table without looking. Al-Khafi opened it. Inside was a worn scrap of map, its edges scorched and soft with age. In the center, between the lines of an old trade route, someone had written in a narrow, slanted hand:

"Too late. He's dead."

His jaw tensed, only slightly. He closed the cloth, slipped it into his pocket, and gave the vendor a gentle pat on the shoulder. He'd come for a message. A name. A voice, even if it was encrypted. Now he was going to find a body instead.

He moved, faster now, casually, but with intent, like a man remembering an appointment that mattered. His contact's last known location was an apartment above an herbalist's courtyard. He turned left, then twice right, through alleys that didn't appear

on city maps. Once, he passed a wall etched with a prayer in brass—a remnant from the revolution, half-melted by flame.

The place he was heading to wasn't far, but it was quiet. A rarity in this city.

Behind a wooden door painted with a blue handprint, up a narrow stair, and through a rusted gate that creaked just enough to be useful.

He knocked once. Waited.

Nothing.

The building crouched behind a collapsed wall of stalls, half-hidden in the shadow of a leaning antenna tower. Once, it had been a bathhouse. You could still see it in the bones—the domed roof split with mosaic fractures, the entryway arched like an invitation to something sacred. But now the paint had peeled. The tiles had dulled. The glass in the windows had been replaced with rust-stained metal sheeting that clanged in the wind. It smelled of damp air and things forgotten.

Al-Khafi stood at the threshold and waited a moment.

He remembered stories of what it once was. A place where jasmine oil perfumed the water, where merchants laughed too loud, where lovers pressed secrets into one another's palms beneath the steam. Color had lived here once. Not just in pigment, but in feeling. The kind of color that sank into memory and stayed there like a prayer. Now, the world had been desaturated—not by time, but by choice. By forgetting. By cleansing. Even the graffiti had faded to beige.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him with the kind of care that keeps silence from sounding like grief.

The air was warm and stale. The room smelled of lavender and old metal—like someone had tried, at the very last moment, to make death feel less mechanical. The apartment was dark. A kettle hissed quietly in the corner, its element long forgotten.

The man lay curled in a claw-footed tub, limbs slack, spine arched slightly as if caught mid-breath. The water had gone cold, the surface unmoving. His eyes were closed. There was no blood,

no sign of pain—just stillness, too quiet to be sleep. The water was still rippling from the faint tremble of an old steam pipe in the wall. The body slightly floated like someone mid-dream.

No movement. No tension in the air. The stillness wasn't cautious. It was final.

He didn't reach for his weapon. There was no one left to use it on.

But Al-Khafi didn't look at the face. He went straight to the skin beneath the neck, leaned in to examine the exposed spine, as if reading a line he didn't want to remember.

And there it was.

A symbol. Familiar. Unmistakable.

Three interlocked circles carved shallow into the flesh, surrounded by a ring of numbers too precise to be human handwriting. It wasn't ink—it was burned into the subdermal layer, done by a tool he'd only seen once before.

He stepped back, heart too quiet. His breath held itself.

He had been eight years old when he first saw that symbol. On the side of a freight crate locked in the belly of a colonial transport train, where he'd hidden with six other children and a dying revolutionary. That night, when the crate opened, the world changed.

The crate had spoken.

Not in words. Not in language. But in sensation. A hum beneath the bones. A memory that wasn't his. A pulse that never left.

He had not dreamed of it since he was seventeen.

Al-Khafi crouched again. He reached into his coat, pulled a small tool—a knife that didn't shine—and carefully sliced a square of the flesh where the scar had formed. He sealed it in a vial, tightened the lid.

Then he stood, looked at the man one last time, and whispered under his breath.

"May your dreams find their truth now."

The man he was supposed to meet had not survived long enough to speak. That made things messy. And worse—



predictable. If someone had traced the message to its source, they could trace it back to him, too.

He drifted back into the crowd, his body in motion, but his mind somewhere else.

The footsteps were still there. Still wrong.

Al-Khafi turned down a narrow alley that led to a door most people mistook for storage. It opened without a knock. Inside, a dim room buzzed with the low hum of mechanical needles and the faint scent of lavender polish. The woman at the table didn't speak. She wore a magnifying lens over one eye and threaded metallic filament into velvet like it was scripture.

Al-Khafi set down a small pouch of coins on the counter. She didn't look up.

He disappeared behind the curtain.

When he emerged a few minutes later, he was dressed in a darker coat, longer in the sleeves, with reinforced stitching at the cuffs. The crimson scarf was wound precisely—not flamboyant, but just bold enough to distract from his face. He slipped off his broken goggle lens and replaced it with a small brass monocle that caught the light like a coin on a string. Utterly impractical. Perfectly distracting.

The woman gave a single nod, as if to say: Now you're someone else.

He walked back into the market from a different angle. Two alleys from the signal tower, Al-Khafi slowed. He felt it again—that slight pressure behind his steps, the rhythm just off. The man thought he was invisible.

Wrong shoes.

Too quiet.

Breath too tight.

Not Bureau Mechanika... or was it? They would've used someone who could pass. So who? If it *was* the Bureau, they'd forgotten how to blend in—or maybe they wanted to be seen. He was still part of the Bureau. Officially. But sometimes, it felt like he'd missed a memo.

The Bureau wasn't about machines, not really. It was about interfaces—between people and power, between perception and protocol. They described themselves as engineers of continuity, safeguarding the fabric of civilization one data thread at a time. Memory management, they called it. Al-Khafi had called it loyalty. He was one of theirs. An archivist turned field operative. Surveillance-trained, field-assigned. Six dead dialects. Five forged identities. One name the Bureau used when things had to vanish cleanly. He knew their algorithms. Their cover structures. Their silences.

And lately, he had begun to wonder whether they preserved the truth. Or just whatever version of it made the world easier to explain. He hadn't said that out loud. Not yet. But some part of him had already stopped believing.

He turned a corner and passed a narrow tea stall with curtains drawn and steam curling from within. He made eye contact with the owner, gave a slight tilt of the head.

The man nodded back.

Al-Khafi kept walking, letting his shadow grow long.

Then he ducked right—sharply, through a half-collapsed frame of a carpet merchant's abandoned stall—and vanished from the tail's line of sight. By the time the tail reached the edge of the alley, Al-Khafi was behind him.

"You've got three tells," he said softly.

The agent spun, hand halfway to his belt. A tall, pale figure. Foreign. Rigid posture. No smile on his lips. No rhythm in his breath.

Al-Khafi didn't need to draw. He just stepped forward—too close for comfort, too fast for thought.

"You don't blink when the wind picks up. You walk like you're trained not to look at windows. And you forgot," he said, "that no one in Marrakesh wears gray."

The agent opened his mouth—but Al-Khafi raised a finger.

"Don't speak. Not in that accent."

He took a step back.

"Now here's what's going to happen. You're going to keep walking. You're going to pass that tea stall, the one with the red lantern. The man inside is going to ask if you want mint or saffron. Doesn't matter what you answer. He'll walk you out the other side and make sure you never come back."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll meet the people who remember what this place used to be. The kind who don't need permission to protect it."

For a second, the man hesitated. Calculating.

Then he turned and walked—straight toward the tea stall.

The curtains pulled back.

The lantern shifted.

Al-Khafi didn't watch what happened next, but muttered to himself.

"Why bother? Some targets shoot themselves in the foot just fine."

He was already gone—melted into the color and scent of the souk, into the world that had once raised him and still sheltered those who moved like they belonged.

Above it all, where rooftops narrowed and wind pressed thin against the stone, a woman adjusted her cracked spyglass. She moved with careful precision. One knee pressed against the crumbling edge of a terrace, fingers steady despite the uneven tiles beneath her. The spyglass clicked softly as she recalibrated the lens. Down below, the medina unfolded like a living map: brass rooftops, steam coils, tram cables threading through the air like veins. She ignored all of it, except for one man.

Al-Khafi walked with the same effortless calm she remembered. A little older, maybe. Still impossible to predict. Still dangerously good at vanishing.

She didn't smile.

She hadn't in years.

From her perch on the weather-worn balcony of an abandoned calligraphy school, she could see most of the old quarter. From

here the medina looked like a map drawn by fire—slanted rooftops and blinking signal towers, terraces crawling with sun-dried laundry, smoke threads drifting up like prayers.

But still her eyes were only on him.

He moved through the crowd as if the city were breathing for him, not around him. Calm, elegant, never hurried. A man who knew exactly how much space to take up in a room, and when to vanish from it.

She adjusted the focus again, tracking his steps as he emerged from the herbalist's courtyard and rejoined the crowd below. His coat flared slightly as he moved, and for a moment, she caught a glimpse, just a shape, a shadow of metal at his wrist. The blade. Still tucked in the left sleeve of his coat. The one he'd used in the apartment. He hadn't even cleaned it. He never did. He always treated his tools like memories: better left stained. His posture told her what she needed to know. He remembered.

Whatever was etched into that poor bastard's back—it struck him somewhere deep. She saw it in the way his shoulders shifted.

Not fear.

Not panic.

Recognition.

And underneath that, something colder. Older.

He had felt it before.

The woman lowered the spyglass and sat back against the crumbling wall behind her. The sandstone was warm with the memory of daylight. She slipped the glove off her right hand and flexed her fingers, careful not to catch the worn skin at her knuckle—the place where the signal chip had left a scar, long before she became Lira Varga, operative of the Kommission—the agency that had, years ago, remade her into the quiet creature she'd become. She felt the slight tremor—a symptom of strain. The neural modulator at the base of her spine was overdue for calibration. A side effect of using her custom signal-jump implant too often. She'd pushed it too hard in Tangier. Lira hated how her body reminded her of limits. It hadn't used to.

She reached into her coat, pulled out a worn metal tin no larger than a cigarette case. Inside: five translucent tabs, and one brass earpiece etched with the crest of the Kommission. She didn't reach for the tabs. Not yet. Instead, she slipped the earpiece into place and spoke low, in a clipped Vienna accent softened by years of translation.

"Varga. Confirming visual on Al-Khafi. He found the body."

A pause.

Crackling static answered her. Then a voice, male, curt.

"Did he recover the scar?"

Lira hesitated.

"Yes."

"Does he know what it is?"

She looked down at the city. Al-Khafi had vanished again—melted into steam and shadow like always.

"He remembers it," she said.

The pause this time was longer. Sharper.

"Maintain contact. Do not engage. We want the source, not the ghost."

The earpiece clicked off.

Lira took a slow breath.

Of course they wanted the source. They always did. Truth was only useful to people like her agency if it could be refined, packaged, controlled. But something in her gut pulled sideways when she saw his face. That flicker of memory. The pain he didn't show. The part of him that hadn't been filed away like hers had.

She slipped the glove back on and stood.

A breeze caught the edge of her coat, lifting the hem just enough to show the barrel of the collapsible pistol strapped to her thigh. Beside it, the metal edge of a thin, glassy blade—one designed to sever neural links cleanly, quietly.

She wouldn't need it yet. Maybe not at all.

But Lira Varga didn't believe in leaving things to chance.

She turned from the edge of the rooftop, stepped into shadow, and disappeared without a sound.

DISQUIET

The copper case clicked shut with a sound that echoed longer in Al-Khafi's mind than it did in the alley.

He stood in the shadow of a decaying signal tower, just beyond the reach of the souk's rhythm, holding the tiny container in one gloved hand. Inside it—no larger than a folded coin—was the burned skin taken from the corpse. A fragment of flesh with a mark no one should remember. And yet here it was.

Three interlocking circles. Precisely etched. Not by blade. Not by flame. A method far more deliberate. Far more ancient. He didn't touch the mark. But he knew what it meant.

The Kommission für Gedächtnissicherheit. Germany's great gift to a forgetful world. Not an agency so much as an apparatus—a labyrinth of bureaucracy, doctrine, and cold machinery disguised as salvation. It claimed to protect society from the chaos of memory. It promised security by removing the past like a splinter.

And it worked.

In Germany, the Kommission had turned history into vapor and silence into virtue. Cities gleamed, but lifelessly. No graffiti. No arguments. No books older than the reset. The food was clean, tasteless. The streets were safe, and no one looked each other in the eye. The only sounds were the soft clicks of surveillance drones. Even grief had been sorted into categories. It had a volume limit. People called it peace. But it felt more like well-lit extinction.

He stared at the mark again. And for a moment, it felt like the air in the room had thickened. Like the past was fighting to

surface—and the world above was already reaching down to smother it again.

He should have reported it immediately. Called it in. Encrypted the location. Marked it for extraction. That's what the rules said. That's what they trained him to do.

But rules were for things you understood.

Instead, he stood there in the dying light, the copper case warm in his hand, and watched the sun bleed into the rooftops like it was trying to paint over something it couldn't erase.

He didn't trust the Bureau to handle this. He didn't trust anyone.

Not with a symbol that wasn't supposed to exist.

Not with a memory that still made his chest tighten like a wire pulled too far.

This wasn't a report. This was a reckoning.

And before he let anyone else touch it, he needed to know exactly what kind of ghost had come back wearing skin.

He moved through the narrow corridors of the old quarter, leaving the souk behind. The streets grew quieter here, slower, like language spoken in a dream. Laundry flapped between buildings, whispering stories he didn't want to hear. Every brick felt warm with memory.

He passed a tea shop that had once been a safehouse. A fountain where he'd hidden a cipher chip under a missing tile. A bakery whose owner still looked at him with something between fondness and fear.

This city remembered him in pieces. Just enough to sting.

He entered a courtyard shaded by fig trees and steam grates, ducked through a locked service entrance, and climbed a stairwell that creaked like an old violin. At the top, he reached a door marked only by a brass spiral etched into the frame—a symbol no one ever looked at unless they knew what it meant.

The Archive.

Not a library. Not exactly. It was a place where records vanished instead of appearing. A soft chamber of paper ghosts

and forgotten machines, hidden deep in the administrative skeleton of Marrakesh's Bureau Mechanika.

The Bureau itself was a sprawling tangle of data-registry, surveillance feeds, and quietly sanctioned memory manipulation—equal parts archivist and censor, its real purpose buried beneath layers of protocol and steam.

He twisted the brass ring on his index finger, aligning the etching along its inner rim with the edge of the lock panel. The mechanism blinked once, accepted the sequence, and hissed open. Al-Khafi stepped inside.

Dust and silence greeted him like old friends. Shelves rose toward skylights layered with soot. Clockwork filing machines clicked quietly along tracks in the walls. The air smelled of leather, oil, and oxidized thought.

"Good evening, Al-Khafi," said a voice from somewhere between the shelves, "you're late. And you look tired."

"I'm both," he replied, removing his coat.

From behind a high desk stepped Zohra el-Hadi, the Archive's chief keeper. Gray-eyed, sharp-tongued, and unreasonably fond of green ink. She wore a shawl draped carelessly over one shoulder, ink stains speckled along its edge like old constellations. Her hair was pulled back in a tight knot that somehow looked more dangerous than elegant. She moved with the composure of someone who had memorized the location of every secret in the room, and who could, if pressed, weaponize each one.

There were stories about her. That she once redacted a Minister's entire career with a single missing ledger. That her filing system ran deeper than the Bureau's own memory vaults. That she had never forgotten a name—only filed them under regret or revenge.

Whether any of it was true didn't matter. She had the air of someone who would make it true, if the moment called for it.

She raised an eyebrow.