**Aid work In North Africa**

Elanor paused and wiped sweat from her face. It was hot inside the back of the truck and the work was making her sweat. But in spite of the discomfort she was happy.

Her work involved unpacking crates of food aid, and moving the smaller boxes to the back of the truck where her companions could hand out the packages to the clamorous refugees gathered around the truck.

Elanor appeared to be an African female about forty, six feet three inches tall and solidly built. She was dressed in western jeans and t-shirt, her hair was died a fashionable orange-red and tied back with a colorful bandana. She was a widow living in England with her three children, but they were now late teenagers, old enough to look after themselves with a little help from her parents. She had been born in Africa, and for months the feeling had been growing on her that she should do some volunteer work overseas. That had led to her being asked to join a group of aid workers in this Northern African country.

At first it had been new and exciting; now the excitement had worn off in the face of grinding poverty and starvation all around. On the other hand she felt that she was making a difference to people’s lives.

She loaded up a small hand cart and tipped the boxes off at the back of the truck, turning again to fetch another load. The truck rocked as someone got into the back, and she turned to see who it was. Two African men carrying rifles had climbed in.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” she demanded. “You go back outside!”

The one closest pointed his rifle at her. “Get out. We taking this!” he ordered.

“No you don’t! This is for the refugees. You get out!” She pushed the rifle barrel aside and stepped up to him, her eyes flashing. She was taller and heavier than him, and wasn’t about to give in.

He looked taken aback and swung a blow at her with his clenched fist. She reacted instinctively, the karate training from her university days coming back to her. She blocked his blow with the outer edge of her forearm against the inside edge of his. He grunted in pain.

“You would hit a woman? Shame on you!” she scolded. “I could be your mama? Double shame on you!”

Oops! She thought. That’s not how you are supposed to speak to a man armed with a gun. This could go quite badly for her.

The first one looked angry, but the second laughed. “You too ugly to be my mama. You get out or I will shoot.”

Elanor glared at him, but decided she should do as she was told. “An’ you too rude to be my son.” She moved to pick up her bag.

“Leave it and get out!” the first one ordered.

“This is mine, not yours!” she scolded. “Did your mama raise you to be a thief?” continuing her movement to pick up her bag.

“Leave it and get out!” the first one yelled again.

She glared at him, daring him to shoot and hoping he wouldn’t. “It has women’s things in it. You want them for yourself?” She picked the bag up. “Are you a girl?”

“Leave it!” He snarled again. “I’ll shoot you!”

Elanor stared at him. “You shoot me and my ghost will haunt you the rest of your short miserable life. Everything you try will fail. And when you die you body will lie in a ditch and be eaten by dogs.”

“Take it and go!” he snarled. The second man was laughing.

She swung her bag over her shoulder, moved to the tailgate of the truck, sniffing haughtily as she passed him, and leaped to the ground. There were more armed men there, and her companions were being held under guard.

George Theophilus, their jaunty Greek driver, looked downcast and worried. Joe Green, middle aged and balding, looked as if he were fighting back tears. Paul Nash, thirty something lay preacher, was looking wooden faced. Janice Cates, a petite blond nurse in her mid twenties, was shivering.

“Is everyone all right?” Elanor asked as she joined them.

“We’re unhurt.” was all Paul replied.

“I’m frightened.” Janice stammered.

Elanor put her arm around the girl and drew her into a hug. She could feel the girl shaking and feel her racing heart. “Don’t you worry, Big Mama will look after you.” She made soothing noises as if the girl were a child, holding her as she calmed.

I’ll look after you, she thought - but who will look after me? Holy mother that’s why you put me here, you’ll look after me, won’t you?

They were bundled into the back of a small van along with several of their captors and driven through crowded streets for maybe twenty minutes. They stopped before a large house and were ordered out of the van and herded into a large store-room, its small windows blacked out. The men were chained to one wall with long chains around their ankles, the two women were left free.

One of their captors spied the silver medallion around Elanor’s neck - a silver disk with a cameo carved from onyx of a raven clutching a spear - and tried to steal it. Elanor batted his hand away.

“Hey! I want that!”

Elanor glared at him. “Are you a baby?” she asked vehemently. “‘Shiny! Shiny! I want! I want!’ It’s not yours.”

The man moved to grasp it but she stopped him, leaning into his face. “That’s the Raven Queen. You take that she will come after you and pluck out your eyes before disembowelling you with her spear!” Elanor mimed the actions for him, and he stepped back, a look of superstitious dread flickering across his face.

“Who is she?”

“In Europe ravens collect the souls of the dead, and the Raven Queen protects women. She will protect me!” She had to stop herself from smiling.

There was a bucket in one corner for a toilet and a wooden table with six chairs near where the men were chained. Elanor kicked up a fuss, demanding that some sort of curtain be erected around the bucket for privacy. She also demanded they be given boiled water. After a delay their captors gave in to her demands.

Over the next few days, many of their captors came to visit. Sometimes they would talk, sometimes they would lecture about their ideology, and sometimes Elanor would lecture their captors.

She learned their captors were part of the rebel communist alliance, that the main factions were the fascist government forces, the Moslem fundamentalists, the Christian fundamentalists, the communist alliance and the local organized crime syndicate. There were also any number of small time crime bosses, local warlords and clan chieftains who were hoping to profit form the civil unrest.

The fact that the aid organization was there to help the starving was a point in their favor, as long as they did not give aid to the starving who supported to any other factions.

“If they are starving they will support anyone who will give them food!” Elanor exclaimed.

“And that’s why we have captured your aid.” one of the rebels explained. “The communist alliance will give the food to those who support us.”

Some of the rebel soldiers wanted to take Janice to another room, but each time they tried Elanor stopped them. Sometimes push came to shove, but since Elanor was six feet three and two hundred and twenty pounds, she could throw her weight around quite effectively. Several of the rebels were sent on their way with bruises to show for their attempts. Even their captors began calling her ‘Big Mama’.

During the ensuing days Elanor tried her best to keep her companions motivated, always expressing the belief that they would be rescued soon and that no harm would befall them. Privately she was pessimistic.

Towards sunset on the nineth day, there was a raucous cawing noise outside. Elanor went to the blacked out window and tried to peer out knowing it was futile. Something tapped on the window and then a piece of the cracked pane fell out, shattering on the floor. A black feathered head peered through the gap. Elanor wasn’t sure what to think, but spoke softly to the bird. “I’m Elanor, I’m a prisoner. Tell your mistress to send someone to rescue me as soon as possible. I’m in danger.”

The bird tilted its head from one side to the other and back again. It gave a raucous “Wark!” and disappeared accompanied by the sound of wings.

I’m probably deluding myself, she thought, but I need some hope. I didn’t think ravens flew here.

Elanor turned to face the others, including two of their guards. “I told you she would find me!” Yes, she thought, I am happy, I don’t feel so abandoned.

They had been held captive for eleven days when a bunch of unknown rebel soldiers filed into the room, accompanied by a man in a smart military uniform that shouted “leader”.

He strode into the room and surveyed the captives. He singled out Elanor, who was conspicuous by her black skin and dyed red hair, and fixed her with an angry glare. “You are the trouble maker. If you interfere once more I will deal with you personally.”

Elanor looked at him, her heart pounding, but willing herself not to betray that. “Me? Trouble maker? I’m just trying to keep us all from harm.”

“You have been warned.” he growled in reply. He strode over to Janice and inspected her. “Ah yes, the blond girl.” Seizing her shirt be ripped it undone, exposing her pale skin and bra. “Mmm, nice.” He pulled down her bra and began fondling her breasts. The girl closed her eyes and shivered.

“You stop that!” Elanor protested, pushing Janice out of his grasp.

The man rounded on her. “You will be taken outside now and all the soldiers will rape you! After that I think I will have you beaten and possibly killed. Do It!” he ordered his men.

Heart pounding, Elanor pushed him back forcefully. “You have the honor of a dog, the manners of a pig, and you have no balls if you have to get your men to rape me!”

“Ugly Bitch! I wouldn’t dirty myself in you!” he spat, drawing a knife and slashing at her. Elanor reacted instinctively, her decade old karate training coming to her rescue again. She stepped forward as he slashed, meeting the inside edge of his right wrist with the outside edge of her left forearm forcibly enough to send the knife spinning away. Then she punched with her right fist, focusing on a point six inches behind his chin, with all her weight and all her fury behind it.

The man flew backwards two paces and dropped like a sack of potatoes, to lie unmoving. Damn that felt good!

Oh Lord! Elanor thought. I’ve killed him! Aloud she ordered “And don’t none of you others think to try that! I’ve had enough! You will unchain the men and we will leave!”

There was shock on many faces, and whispered comments passing back and forwards. Another man who was obviously the leader’s second in command cocked a pistol and pointed it at her.

Holy Mother! She breathed. I’m only trying to keep us safe. Get us out of here now safe and sound. But if I have to die defending this girl, so be it. She started purposefully toward the man.

Just then someone clapped, and a moment later an Egyptian looking man in a lemon colored linen suit, lavender shirt, gold chains and mirror sunglasses stepped to the fore, the soldiers parting to let him through. “That was very well done!” he exclaimed in accented English. The man with the pistol swung to point at the newcomer. “Put that thing away before you hurt someone!” The Egyptian ordered.

Surprisingly the gunman uncocked the weapon and returned it to his holster. “Who are you?” he barked.

The Egyptian ignored him. Gesturing to the other soldiers he ordered “You heard the lady. Unchain the prisoners. Now!” His voice had the bark of command, and two of them jumped to do that.

Elanor was astounded. “I don’t understand. Who are you? What are you doing here?”

The Egyptian smiled sweetly. “Rescuing you, but you have done a remarkable job of keeping everyone safe and sound, and dealing with him!”

With that he knelt beside the fallen man. “I think I’ve killed him.” Elanor confessed. “He’s not moving and he doesn’t seem to be breathing.”

The Egyptian stretched out his hand over the fallen man, and the man twitched and drew in a shuddering breath. “He’ll live, but I think you may have broken his jaw. He’s very lucky it wasn’t his neck.” He stood up again.

“Someone fetch a bucket of water and throw it on him. And who can drive the van outside? We will be leaving soon.”

The man who had threatened them with a pistol demanded “Who are you? You can’t just barge in here and give orders! I will have you killed very slowly!”

The Egyptian turned and looked hard at the second in charge. “I am Lucifer. Perhaps you have heard of me? Abadon sent me. You know what will happen in you cross Abadon.” The man blanched and mumbled something inaudible.

“Your friend here needs a doctor.” The Egyptian continued. He looked around at the erstwhile prisoners. “We are leaving now.” He turned back to the rebels. “Two of you carry him to the back of the van. I want a driver and a guard in the front seat, and you” he gestured to the second in charge “will ride in the back with us. The rest of you - don’t be here when Abadon comes looking. Do I make myself clear?”

The rebels looked at one another with fear and confusion. Some left the room. The Egyptian turned. “Right, lets go!”

It was the same van they arrived in. The rebel leader was groggy and in pain, feeling sorry for himself. He kept one hand holding his jaw and stared continually at Elanor and the Egyptian. Elanor sat beside Janice with her arm about her, telling her in part “That could have happened at almost any English pub, except your boyfriend would have hit him instead.”

Janice took a good hard look at the rebel leader. At first he met her stare, but she held hers until he looked away in discomfort. Then she laughed “You hit him a lot harder. He’s not so cocky now.” Then she squeezed the older woman. “Thanks Big Mama, thanks for looking out for me.”

The others were full of questions for the Egyptian. Who was he, how did he know where to find them, who was Abadon? Why did he call himself Lucifer?

Joe ventured “Isn’t Abadon the boss of bosses of organized crime?”

The Egyptian smiled “Abadon is a senior underworld figure, that’s true.” He glanced at the two rebels, speaking softly. “They believe he will kill their entire families and then themselves, and they will die slowly and very painfully. It serves our purpose that they believe that.” He leaned forward. “If you search your religious myths you will find in them the myth of Abadon, the angel of the Pit of Chaos, the Arch Angel of Destruction, the king of the Locusts.” Paul was nodding agreement. “The crime boss takes his name from this figure, but ...” here he paused for effect “that crime boss does not exist, and I am not a criminal.”

“So who are you? What are you?”

“I am a trouble shooter for the U.N.”

“S.A.S?” Joe queried.

“No. Mostly I work alone, I am not part of the military of any country.”

Joe laughed. “In other words you’re a bit like James Bond!”

The Egyptian smiled again. “Perhaps. But I do not carry weapons, I do not kill people, and I do not work for any government. I pop up in trouble spots, help sort things out, and disappear again.”

“But what’s your name?” Joe persisted. “Your real name?”

“Ah,” said the man, spreading his hands. “you can never know that, it would compromise my safety. Think of me more like the Phantom, the Ghost Who Walks.”

Elanor looked at him. Now that she knew he wasn’t a crime enforcer, she found herself liking him. “The Man Of Mystery. Even the Phantom carries a gun. You’re more like Dr. Who then. But even he is called the doctor or just doctor. We have to give you a name, we can’t just call you ‘hey you’! And you don’t really want to be called Lucifer do you?”

“We could just call him Mr. Troubleshooter.” Joe butted in.

“That would not be appropriate. Forget it.” The Egyptian replied.

Joe’s face went momentarily blank. “Oh sorry, I must have dozed off there. What were we talking about?”

“Nothing much.” The Egyptian replied. “We’ll be at the U.N. check point soon, and there I must leave you. If anyone asks you what happened, just remember that Abadon sent me, and I am Lucifer.”

“Yeah, right.” Joe responded. “You’re Mr. Abadon’s enforcer. It’s amazing the way you found us. That crime boss has tentacles everywhere.”

Elanor caught the Egyptian’s gaze, winked and tapped the side of her nose, the side that Joe could not see.

The Egyptian nodded. “Joe, don’t forget that Elanor kept you all safe, and felled the rebel leader with one punch.”

At the U.N. checkpoint everyone had to get out of the vehicle. Once the peace keepers realized that the captured party was being returned unharmed they became much more relaxed. The Egyptian nodded to their driver and guard and the two men quietly walked away, unnoticed by anyone except Elanor, standing beside the Egyptian.

“What did you do to Joe? He’s completely forgotten about you.”

“Ah, you are very perceptive. It’s an old trick used by stage magicians and involves a post hypnotic suggestion. I don’t have time to explain. But you will not say anything about me except the obvious?”

“Only what Joe is saying - Abadon sent you, and you gave the name Lucifer.”

“Thank you. Now how is your hand?”

“Oh, it’s all right. I used to do karate, but I no longer have calluses on my knuckles, so I have skinned them.”

“Not too badly I hope.” He took her hand in his, bowed slightly and kissed her hand. “If you hadn’t looked after the group things may have turned out quite differently. Thank you and adieu. I hope we will meet again someday.”

“I would like that, do you think it is possible?”

“Many things are possible. I am not sure when, but we will meet again.” Then he smiled angelically. “Many of my friends call me Luke, or Lukeios in Greek. It’s a little more convivial than ‘doctor’.”

Elanor’s heart was a-flutter. “Did I tell you I am a widow? Maybe we could meet for coffee sometime?”

“Ah, I did not know. But I suspected you were single to be working here. Well Elanor Johnson, if you continue to be associated with this aid agency, I will contact you through them when I am free and somewhere nearby. Otherwise please leave a forwarding address. Take care.”

“Thank you Luke. You take care too. Until we meet again.”

He began to walk away, then turned back to her. “I know you won’t tell anyone. The Raven Queen sent me.” He made a gesture with his hand, touching his forehead, his lips and his heart, then he turned again and walked away.

Elanor watched him with a sense of loss, wondering where he was going, how long before she would see him again, and who he really was. His mention of the Raven Queen was food for thought. There were so many questions she wanted him to answer.

Then she smiled. He was a man of mystery, Lucifer was a code name like Abadon. And he was a good man, she owed him her life, they all did. He called himself Luke, and he was probably Greek since he mentioned the Greek version of Luke.

For some reason she looked at her right hand and realized her skinned knuckles had healed completely. Could Luke have done that? She looked up, dismayed to find she could not see him. There was no one nearby, and he could not walk that fast, surely. Where had he gone?

Then she sighed. He had promised to see her again, she would leave it at that. Right now she had to deal with being a returned prisoner, and the likelihood of world media attention in the near future. Already Joe was sounding forth on his theories of their rescue, and a crime lord called Abadon.