

The Cave of the Patriarchs was located in the ancient city of Hebron, in the highly volatile region of the West Bank. It was set underneath a temple shrine built at one time by Herod the Great. After that, it had been converted into a grandiose mosque from the Crusader and Saladin-era. Most importantly, it was purported to house the remains of the grand patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—thus gaining its illustrious name.

Hebron itself was the second largest Palestinian city in the world, right behind Gaza. In Biblical times King David ruled there for seven years. At one point it was also a part of the Byzantine Empire. Its rich legacy and religious significance stood as everlasting testaments to this very day.

It was late at night, and there weren't many souls out on the streets. Restless clouds skirted the velvet-black sky, revealing a sprinkling of diamond-shimmering stars. Behind the wheel of his Skoda Octavia Mk3, Ramsey entered the old city from the north. The beaten cobblestone streets were dangerously narrow and windy.

Like being in the back alleyways of Italy. On his way in he'd passed by a megalithic limestone quarry; now he was passing through downtrodden pottery workshops, glassblowing factories, and main staple marketplaces called bazaars. The iconic Mamluk architecture pierced the skyline in sheer defiance.

A few locals looked upon his approach with utter disdain and baleful suspicion. Some vendors were cooking street-side food, meandering back home, selling tricks, or playing soccer. In some cases some waltzed by, within mere feet, faces hidden behind shrouds, carrying full-fledged assault rifles in their hands.

Ramsey tried to move through the area quickly, without attracting attention, but also not too fast to alert them. It didn't always work. It was a delicate balance. As far as he was concerned he was in hostile territory. The West Bank was no ally or comrade to Israel, no matter what the media portrayed.

Shifting to a lower gear, Ramsey descended down a steep hill, nearing a scenic park. There was a grassy hill, framed by gravel walking paths, and gnarled fig trees. It was here where he slowed down, turned off the headlights, and came to a complete stop at the end of the street sidelining the park.

Closed after hours, no one was visible around these parts. Not even vagrants. The Cave of the Patriarchs lay the next block over. He wanted to exercise extreme caution, so pulling up to the front entrance was definitely out of the question.

He killed the engine. In the driver's seat, immersed in total darkness, he sat motionless for a second; steeling his mind and body for what was to come. He knew what had to be done. Then he patted the left side of his overcoat—feeling the firm holster along with the reassuring weight of his gun still there. He slid the keys out of the ignition, quietly opened the door, and stepped outside.

There was a fresh, welcoming breeze tainted by burnt meat coming from somewhere. He once again did a quick 360-degree recon of his surroundings. He wanted to make absolutely sure he hadn't been followed and that no one was lurking around. For the time being all seemed well. A few lights were on in the crumbling high-rises across the way.

Nothing too threatening. Unless a sniper was in position. But he didn't have the luxury of time to worry or concern himself about that. It was out of his control. For now, he had to keep moving.

Staying off the street, and out of sight, he kept close to the perimeter of the park. The whole time he tried to keep his focus ahead of him, toward the colossal temple structure, otherwise known

as the Cave of the Patriarchs. At this distance, he could already see it silhouetted against the dismal starlight.

There was a towering rock wall encircling it with a stone stairway similar to the Lincoln Memorial leading up to its monumental entrance. It truly looked magnificent and awe-inspiring. Here, in this land, it was what the pyramids meant to Egypt.

He moved with relative ease, blending seamlessly from one shadow into the next. He paused momentarily to get a sense of the place. All the while knowing in the back of his mind that time was of the essence. There was no telling what *the bandit* had in store.

He had to make it in time. He had to stop him. That was all there was to it. The repercussions if he failed were too staggering to contemplate.

There was a streetlamp at the corner. He would have to cross in order to get there. He checked his surroundings once more, feeling confident that it was safe. *Safe*, that word meant false security, especially here. He listened intently for anything. There was a distant rumbling engine, a hot sizzle from a barbecue, and querulous voices that were so far off behind him he chose to dismiss them.

He couldn't wait any longer.

He crossed the street, veering off as far as he dared away from the source of the streetlight. When he made it across he allowed himself to breathe a short sigh of relief. He had reached his destination unscathed.

This was where he reached under his overcoat and retrieved his trustworthy Ruger. The familiar feel and weight of it was such a reassuring comfort. With it in hand, he felt emboldened—secure enough to go on.

With his back up against the wall, and staying low to the ground, he made his way toward the front steps. After all, there was no way he could scale a twelve-foot high wall. Not without the proper equipment.

He reached the steps in total silence—using the utmost caution and covert stealth maneuvers. He found himself surprised so far that no one was here. He thought he would've run into Lieutenant Abrams by now, or, at least, a member of his squad. Instead, there was nobody out here. Of course, it was after hours and as dead as a cemetery at midnight.

*Had they already gone in?*

That seemed most likely. The one thing going for him though was that he wasn't too late. The place hadn't blown up yet.

As Ramsey surveyed every nook and cranny of the structure before him, he wished he had more time to admire it. From the newly-remodeled gabled roof, clerestory windows, vaulted eaves—and ancient minarets that still remained from the Saladin era—all of it was gloriously heralded under the encompassing night sky.

It was disparaging to think some lunatic inside would have the audacity to destroy what so many others had fought to build and be revered each and every day. But sadly, enemies were out there, hell-bent on mass destruction, and the only way to deal with them effectively was to put a bullet through their brain. They understood that. If history had taught us anything it was that appeasement to dictators had gone out the window since WWI.

Ramsey gripped his gun tight, looked around, and then made a move for the stairs. He ascended to the top in less than ten seconds. As soon as he did so he ducked behind a stone megalith flanking the entrance. He remained absolutely still and perfectly silent as he listened to the sounds around him.

There was the pitter-patter of a sprinkler going off somewhere, a jet roaring overhead, coupled with the distant noise of never ending traffic.

He felt all alone where he was. Maybe this had been a complete waste of time. But he refused to believe that. Kopinsky wouldn't have sent him out here on a fool's errand. No way. Something was going on. He just had to get inside to find out, that's all.

Moving as swiftly as a feral cat, Ramsey darted for the entrance, having to cross out into the open to do so. He felt exposed and vulnerable, but he was in a race against the clock. He had to forgo other extravagant, time-consuming methods of finding a way in. He reached the front door which was covered by a medieval-looking steel-barred gate—and found it slightly ajar.

That's when he heard a cold, metallic click that was all-too-familiar.

"Stop right there." The voice was incisive but constrained into a fierce whisper.

Forced to oblige, Ramsey halted in his tracks, knowing the voice had emanated from directly to the left side of him. In the deep caldron of shadows, somewhere behind the recessed pillars that fronted the entrance, it was almost impossible to pinpoint until now.

Ramsey gritted his teeth, regretting the decision to rush the front door and the fact that someone had managed to get the drop on him. He didn't say a word. He just remained motionless, low to the ground, with his hands raised, signifying that he was not an imminent threat.

He heard the invisible figure move out from the depths of the shadows. Whoever it was approached him rather apprehensively, taking their time, as if assessing the extent of the threat level. The closer the footsteps neared him, the more the figure began to materialize.

[END OF READING SAMPLE]