

DORIA

A Novel

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CHAPTER 1. A NATIONAL TREASURE

“Run! Don’t stop! Run!”

Carla took a quick glance over her shoulder. Her mother stood several meters behind her, waving, shouting at her. But the screaming crowd kept surging forward, sweeping the six-year-old girl through the narrow alley. Soon, all she could see of her mother was the sleeve of her gray sweater before she disappeared in the crowd.

Bursts of gunfire turned the surging crowd into a panicked torrent. Carla picked up the hem of her stained white dress. Her thin tan legs churned. Her wild mane of black hair flew behind her.

“Arrrgh!”

A man ahead of Carla collapsed. The crowd rushed around and over him.

Around her, whizzing, whizzing. Muzzle flashes from rooftops and doorways on both sides.

A woman rushing next to Carla clutched her chest. Blood flowed between her fingers, cascading down her arm. She sunk to her knees.

A teenage boy spun to his left by a bullet hitting his shoulder. Another bullet struck him through the middle of his forehead. A plume of blood, bone, and brain burst from the back of his head.

Carla fixed her eyes forward and kept running.

A man rushed in front of her, slamming her against an ancient flagstone wall. A protruding rock tore the sleeve of her thin white jacket. As the man lurched forward, a loud whiz passed by Carla’s ear. The man’s thin coat burst apart below his left shoulder. Dark blood poured out of the hole.

Carla found a door a few steps ahead of her. A peg held the door shut. She slid it to the right and slipped inside.

Inside, she heard moaning. She looked to her right. A man was lying on his back in bed. Something under a heavy wool blanket thrust up and down rapidly,

then stopped. He grabbed an alarm clock on the table next to him and chucked it at Carla. She dodged it.

“Beat it, you little rat!” he snarled. “I want to die happy!”

More gunfire rattled overhead.

Carla found an open window on the opposite side of the room. She scrambled over a table covered with dirty dishes and adult magazines and climbed outside. She landed on her feet. After a quick look side to side, she pressed her back against the outside of the shack. The wall was pressboard where much of the paint had flaked away. A few rows of flagstone rocks at the foundation held the board in place.

Again, she glanced from side to side. Although the crowds still screamed from the alley on the other side of the shack, the area behind the shacks appeared empty.

Ahead of her, jagged remnants of flagstone walls stuck out among the bunch grass that glistened from the morning dew. They led up a slope to a hill. At the top of the hill was a giant stone pyramid. Most of the building was shrouded in the early morning mist.

More gunfire rattled. Something heavy thudded to her right. A government soldier had fallen from the room. Carla recognized the dark green steel helmet, heavy military jacket with the green and red flag sewn onto the sleeve, baggy dark green pants, and heavy black boots. His face was a tangled mess of blood and skin.

Something creaked on the corrugated metal roof above her.

“Hey, kid!” The shout was directed towards Carla.

The barrel of a machine gun peered over the edge of the roof.

Carla ran. She dashed towards the closest flagstone wall. Bullets pierced into the ground behind her.

She jumped over the stone wall and rolled against it. Bullets ricocheted against the wall and hit the ground in front of her.

Every muscle in Carla’s body trembled. She took small, shallow breaths to keep the puffs of fog from giving her away. She let out a frightened moan but quickly suppressed it. She was too afraid to cry.

More gunfire burst from overhead. When it stopped, Carla noticed that more no more bullets were heading towards her.

She gave a quick peek over the wall. The government soldier slumped over the roof. Blood dripped down from his head.

Carla looked again at the ancient pyramid.

She took a deep breath and ran. She turned her head from side to side, looking for soldiers, gunfire, anything.

As she neared the pyramid, she found a collapsed section of a fence. She jumped over the chain link.

R-r-rip.

Carla tumbled and fell. A strip of her dress hung from the chain link.

Men's voices shouted in the distance.

Carla turned from the fence and ran.

She rushed toward a massive granite staircase at the base of the pyramid. She scrunched herself where the staircase abutted against the side. She took a soft, silent breath and looked up. The crease between the staircase and adjacent wall formed a perfect line. The gray speckled granite seemed to fade into the bleak morning sky.

Carla breathed hard. Her breath fogged in front of her. The only sound was her heart beating loud and fast. She looked to either side. No one else was there.

She crouched as she approached the foot of the stairs. She glanced over the edge of the staircase, then climbed over and rushed up the wide steps. There was an opening at the top. She dashed to the top and slipped behind a wall.

She found herself moving forward, as if the building itself was drawing her in. The stone floor was smooth and felt cool and comforting against her bare feet. She let her big toe trace the joint between two large stones. They fit together tightly and formed a perfectly straight line.

A sudden noise made her jerk her head to the left. A pinging sound echoed through the hall. She moved towards it. It was water dripping from an opening in the ceiling.

Carla walked on. The pyramid was larger than she imagined. The rooms were cavernous, separated by large stone walls with gently arched portals. Like the floors, the walls were perfectly assembled, with no gaps in between.

From around one wall, she saw a shaft of light. A ramp led towards it. Carla followed.

When she reached the next level, she walked through a stone portal into a large chamber. Her mother told her about sports arenas that could seat tens of thousands. She imagined that this room could fill more. At the end, bathed in light that streamed through openings in the ceiling, was a large stone wall. Unlike the other walls, this one was a sparkling white. Carved into the stone was some sort of bird. Its head and beak extended upwards. The wings unfurled fully at its sides and five long tail feathers extended from the bottom. It looked like a seagull, but Carla wasn't sure.

She stood silently, looking at the large hall and the strange white bird. Something about the place felt peaceful and reverent to Carla. She felt safe.

Then someone clenched her shoulder hard.

“Get down!”

Carla found herself tossed behind a wall. She opened her mouth to protest. Then, the hall echoed with the clacking of machine gun fire.

She looked up at the person with the AK-47 crouching beside her. She recognized this uniform as well: khaki jacket, blue jeans, dark brown boots, black bandana over the nose and mouth, the camouflage baseball cap with an embroidered five-pointed star. It was a communist rebel soldier. Carla then noticed the ponytail of light brown hair. The soldier was a woman.

Carla stayed still. The ancient granite walls echoed with clacking and whizzing. A bullet that came close to the woman rebel sheared a stone chip off the wall. The woman spun away from the edge.

Carla finally saw the woman’s eyes. They were a warm brown with long lashes. She looked at Carla, but said nothing.

Several more bullets whizzed by the edge of the wall. The woman released the clip from the AK-47 and shoved in a new one. She spun back to the edge of the wall and fired off more shots.

As she turned, Carla saw the glint of dark metal inside her jacket. She looked at the soldier’s hip. The jacket exposed a holster with a handgun.

Carla turned around. Something dark and metal emerged from the other end of the wall. Then, more metal. It was a machine gun.

The woman continued firing. Her body shook with every shot.

At the other end of the wall, the tip of a boot. The baggy dark green pants of a government soldier.

Carla turned to the gun on the woman’s hip.

The government soldier’s arm and shoulder appeared. Then the helmet. In the faint light, Carla saw the man’s face. He aimed his machine gun at the woman...

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