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SF Said

Illustrated by Dave McKean



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It happened in the 21st Century,

when London was still the capital of an Empire,

and the Empire still ruled the world . . .



Chapter One

It was the week before Midwinter. The rain was lashing down, and the narrow streets of Soho were deep with puddles. Although it was midday, the sky over London was iron grey. Clouds of smoke hung heavy up above, as always.

Adam Alhambra wasn't looking at that bleak Midwinter sky. He was looking at the checkpoint up ahead of him, and shivering. He huddled into his coat, but the wind cut through it like a whip. And that wasn't the only thing that made him feel cold.

He could see the soldier there, behind the metal bars and railings. He could hear his stern voice, turning people back from the boundary that separated Soho from the rest of London. As Adam

watched, biting down on his pencil, a whole family was being marched away at gunpoint, not allowed to leave the Ghetto.

'Next!'

And now it was his turn. Adam put his pencil behind his ear, and stepped up for inspection, under a row of Union Jacks and a portrait of the Emperor.

The soldier was a guardsman in a red coat, with a bristling white moustache. He looked Adam up and down, taking in his skin, his hair, his eyes. The fact that everything about him was just a little different, just a little darker. Then he looked at Adam's papers, saw his name, and here it came . . .

'*Alhambra?*' said the soldier. 'And where are you from, boy?'

'Um – London, sir,' said Adam, trying to sound calm, and failing.

'You know what I mean,' said the soldier. 'Where are you really from?'

Adam looked down. 'My parents came here from the Middle East, sir,' he said, 'but I've lived in London all my life.'

'The Middle East.' The soldier frowned. 'Isn't that where camels used to come from?'

'Camels?' said Adam, mystified. 'I don't know, sir. I don't know anything about the Middle East.

I'm just doing the deliveries for my family's shop, Alhambra & Company. They're depending on me to do them.' He held up his bag, to show the soldier the parcels that were packed so carefully inside.

'Where are the shop's papers?' said the soldier.

'Oh – right here, sir!' Adam fumbled in his pocket for the documents. But as he pulled them out, a little scrap of paper fell out with them, and fluttered to the floor.

Adam's heart thumped. Quick as he could, he scooped it up, and shoved it back into his pocket.

'Was that a drawing?' said the soldier. 'What do you think you are – an artist?'

Adam's cheeks burned. His mouth went dry. 'No, no, sir, of course not,' he said. 'Please. Here are the shop's papers, see?'

The soldier gave him a long, hard look. He looked at the documents even longer and harder. But finally he grunted, and waved Adam through. 'Go on then, camel boy,' he said. 'Don't start any trouble.'

'Thank you, sir,' Adam made himself say, as he went through the checkpoint, and came out onto Oxford Street.

And here, on the other side of the checkpoint, everything was different. People were shopping on the wide open street. Adults were going to work.

Children were going to school. No one was stopping them, searching them, asking them questions.

For a moment, he wished he could be one of them. Just an ordinary British boy, on his way to school. Someone who could go anywhere he wanted, and do anything he dreamed.

But he was a foreigner, and he had a job to do.

He began to run. He raced up Oxford Street, past the grand department stores, onto Tottenham Court Road. Some of the people he passed gave him the same look as the soldier. He could feel their eyes on his skin. *Keep your head down*, his father always said. *Eye contact only makes it worse. Don't look at anyone, or anything, or—*

CRASH!

'Look where you're going!'

Oh no. Adam looked up to see a lean, hungry-looking man, staring down at him with cold blue eyes.

'Sorry, sir,' said Adam – but the man grinned. His white teeth gleamed.

'Relax!' he said brightly. 'Here, I want to show you something.' He put an arm round Adam's shoulder and steered him off the main road, into a side street.

Adam went with him, grateful that he wasn't in trouble. But doubts were gnawing at his mind. The

streets around Tottenham Court Road were grimier and less grand than Oxford Street. There was nothing to see; just thick brick walls, blackened by chimney smoke. No one else was walking here. Something wasn't right.

'Now then,' said the man, as thunder rumbled in the sky. 'Give me your bag, and all your money, and I might just let you live.'

Adam gasped. The man's grip on his shoulder was very tight now, and he was blocking the way back to the road.

'Help!' Adam shouted. But no one on the main road even turned to look.

'Who do you think would help a foreigner?' The man's grin grew wider. 'Now give me that bag, you cockroach.'

Adam's heart hammered.

Desperately, he twisted.

Turned.

And tore himself free.

He ran in the only direction he could: down the side street. But it was a dead end, and it ended at the gates of the dump. A big block of common land, filled with stinking rubbish.

Behind him, he could hear the man's footsteps, pounding on the pavement, hunting him down

through the rain.

So he ran through the iron gates of the dump, through heaps of bin bags and crushed tin cans, shattered glass and torn-up posters. The man kept coming, closer and closer, chasing him deeper into the dump.

Lightning slashed the sky. In its glare, Adam saw a little wooden doorway, hidden behind a mountain of ashes.

He plunged through it into darkness.

Broken windows flashed past him as he ran through the rooms of an empty, ruined building. Then a wall loomed up before him. There were no doors except the one he'd come in by. There was no way out. He was trapped in here, and all alone.

He turned to see the man stalking through the door behind him, something glinting in his hand. A knife.

A metallic taste filled Adam's mouth. '*HELP!*' he screamed –

– and then something roared above his head, louder than the thunder.

