‘The Bibliotheca Alexandrina, *or Aktabat al-Iskandar yah*,is a gem in our modern Alexandrian cultural heritage. Ofﬁcially opened in 2002, it is the intellectual centre not just of Egypt, but of the whole Mediterranean.’ She led them further up the steps. ‘Our city once had the greatest library in the world. Today our collection may not be the biggest, but it’s growing fast, and we hope one day it will be.’

‘How big is it?’ A predictably dressed tourist asked the predictable question.

‘The library has space for 8 million books, as well as several hundred thousand maps and special volumes. However – ’ the guide added with a slight hush, as if revealing a state secret, ‘ – our current collection is only about 600,000 volumes. Which is why, as you’re about to see, most of the shelves are half empty. The collection we do have was donated when the building was completed from countries all over the world. Many of our largest donations came from Spain, France and Mexico. Now we gather books from all across the Middle East, Asia, Europe and the West, and the collection grows every day. One day, all these half-empty shelves will be full.’

With a carefully rehearsed deliberateness, these ﬁnal words were uttered precisely as the group reached the top of the staircase and set eyes upon the focal heart of the library: the main reading room. Audible gasps came from every side, and Emily was not ashamed to let one escape her own lips.

Before them was a truly spectacular sight. A huge, sloping ceiling of glass and stone beamed light on to a library that looked like a cross between the archives of a spacecraft and a postmodern, upper-class executive lounge. Lacquered wood ﬂoors cascaded down the immense angular space, storey after storey, connected by sculpted stairways and gently arching ramps. Row after row of shelves were constructed of a light ash, bordered in brushed aluminium and tastefully illuminated with in-shelf bulbs. Glass partitions accentuated smaller reading and work areas, while artistic balconies overlooked lower levels. Around the forest of immense silver pillars that supported the striking roof, desks sat in rows and clusters, some bare surfaced and waiting to be covered in books and papers, others – hundreds of others – furnished with computer terminals, scanners and printers. Recessed lighting cast a calm and professional glow into those corners where the sunlight, beaming through the skylights above, did not reach.