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The Shifting Sands

The Western Desert

Libya

16th May 1942

The sandstorm came in from the south shortly after noon. It had been preceded by the hot wind the local Arabs called a *qibli*, a searing, all-engulfing torment that seemed to blow straight from the deepest pits of hell, burning and suffocating everything it came in contact with. They had sat out *qiblis* before now, wasted days during which all you could do was endure, grit your teeth, swear, sweat, and lie as still as possible in temperatures as high as 118°F.

They'd been struggling through this particular *qibli* for the second day when Corporal Skinner had cut loose with a string of profanities enough to scorch even this overheated air.

'I do not fucking believe this' were the first intelligible words he uttered. He'd said them so often, so many times before, that no one paid him the slightest bit of notice.

'Lieutenant,' he said, 'I think you should sit up and take a gander.'

Lt Usherwood groaned and crawled out from the low camouflage canvas under which they'd been taking shelter.

'Sorry, sir. Went for a pee, sir. Thought you should see this.'

'What's up?' the commander asked, his tired voice little more than a drawl.

Skinner just pointed. On the southern horizon, the light of midday was giving way to darkness, as black clouds roiled and tumbled across the desert sand. Gerald Usherwood snatched up his long-distance glasses and trained them on the clouds. Not clouds at all, of course, but huge billows of sand that stretched across the horizon from east to west, driven by a high wind that was picking up speed with every second it raced towards them.

'Get everyone back on board,' the lieutenant ordered. 'It'll be on us in minutes.'

‘We’re not too far from the RP, skipper. Should we try to head back while we can? Supplies are running short, and this could go on for days.’

Usherwood shook his head.

‘There’s too much risk of losing our way in this. We won’t be able to take our bearings at night, and I don’t trust the sun compass in a storm. There’ll be time enough to head for the RP once this blows over. Hurry and get some canteens into the cabs.’

The rallying point for the two-vehicle patrol was just over one hundred miles away, at Rebiana. They’d gone out from base at Kufra Oasis as a full patrol of six Chevvy’s, but the two trucks under Lt Usherwood’s command had carried on further west, deep into the Rebiana Sand Sea, on a search for wells. The others had gone north to Taiserbo, where there was talk of German forward units reconnoitring behind British lines.

Something big was coming up. It had been all the talk in Cairo two weeks earlier, and there was a buzz at Kufra, the western HQ for the Long Range Desert Group which had been taken from the Italians just over a year before.

The word was that Rommel planned a push on the Gazala line along the coast. The trouble for anyone trying to hold that line was simple: you could fix one end on the sea and defend it there against all comers, but down south it ran into open desert all the way

down to deepest Africa. Jerry could slip down below your defences and twist round to spike you in the rear. R Patrol was probing for lightweight German manoeuvres, while Usherwood's Sandboys were trying to open a path further west than anyone had tried before.

They were looking for wells and hunting an oasis, a lost paradise called Ain Suleiman: Solomon's Spring. This secret place had long been the stuff of legend. The Bedouin said it had once provided the water for the magical city of Wardabaha, built in the sands by King Solomon, the source of all magic in Arab tradition. According to some blue-veiled Tuareg of the Fezzan, it still existed and was inhabited by a tribe of their brethren, a branch of the Kel Ajjer of Ghat. But no modern explorer had set eyes on the place. It was on no map, save for a map of the mind, where it floated, now here, now there. At the Royal Geographical Society, men in sober suits made fun of Ain Suleiman and its hidden city of magic.

But Gerald Usherwood had believed in it. He'd learnt enough Tamasheq to speak with the Tuareg in their own tongue, something the men in Lowther Lodge were incapable of doing, and he had come to trust them. Ain Suleiman was there, they said, but no one knew the way. It was in the worst part of the sands, they said, it was unreachable by camel, it was probably silted up by now. He knew they were hiding

something, and guessed they knew their way there well enough but thought it wise to avoid entanglements with the Italians or Germans or British. If they were hiding something, he reckoned that meant there was something to hide.

They had barely put their sand goggles over their eyes when the storm struck. One moment the sky was bright blue, the next they found themselves in a thick haze that dropped visibility down to around twenty feet.

Closing the doors and windows kept the full blast of the sandstorm out, but the dust was like powder and crept in through every crack, chink, and cranny it could find. As time passed, a fine coating of sand covered every surface inside the trucks. The patrol wrapped their *gutras* tightly round their faces, but the sand was relentless. It worked its way inside the goggles, into ears and noses and throats, through clothing, down through ammo boots, where it irritated horribly.

Gerald had been through so many sandstorms now he thought his lungs had turned to desert. He knew there was nothing to be done but to grit your teeth, keep your watering eyes closed, and sit it out. This was a bad one, he knew it straight away, one of the worst he'd seen. It could last a day or a week, there was no telling.

All the other members of the patrol were old

hands, and they'd seen their fair share of the desert winds. No one was chosen for the LRDG who wasn't able to put up with a bit of discomfort. Whether they were British, New Zealanders, Aussies or Indians, they were that strange species of human being for whom the empty wastes and searing heat of the Sahara were more home than the Home Counties, Wellington or Calcutta. They positively longed for the silence and the ever-present danger. So they sat and waited, keeping radio silence, singing the latest hits and telling long tales of battles they had fought and women they had bedded.

The storm did not let up for three days. When it ended, it did so suddenly, shortly after 6 a.m. on the third day.

'Thank God for that,' said Gerald. Back home in Gloucestershire, he had no time for a deity, and attended church only because he was the local squire and knew it was bad form to let the side down, the side being the Usherwood family. But here in the long vistas of the desert, beneath night skies thick with the eternal light of endless galaxies, he became a believer. Had he not been brought up in the C of E, he'd have made a happy Muslim ascetic, his heart grown fanatical from the harshness of the empty sands.

Each truck had a sun compass perched above the dashboard. Along with the latest RAF navigational

tables by day and theodolites by night, the sun compass allowed patrols to navigate through uncharted territory. It took moments to get their bearings again, and longer to dig the trucks out of the blown sand, using sand mats. At last, they brushed themselves down and headed west again.

A barrier of *seif* dunes, all over three hundred feet high, pushed them further south, away from the route they'd planned to stay on. They drove through a waste devoid of life, beneath a cruel sky empty of birds or planes. Somewhere to the north, a war was in progress, but down here it seemed that the guns had fallen silent. It was as if the war had ended and all that remained was this desolation, this all-pervasive death.

Dusk had started to fall when Staff Sergeant Chippendale, who was riding shotgun on board Gerald's Chevy, gave a low whistle. Max Chippendale's great talent – and his main qualification for the LRDG – was his remarkable eyesight. He'd been scanning the horizon ahead with glasses, calmly surveying the sands each time they reached the crest of a dune, before the controlled drop to the west flank.

He put his hand urgently on the driver's arm.

'Hold your horses, you great lummo,' he shouted. 'Weary' Leary, the Kiwi trooper Gerald had borrowed from T patrol, turned the wheel sharply, bringing

the truck to a stop just short of the precipice in front.

‘What is it?’ the lieutenant asked from his seat behind.

‘Not sure yet, skipper. Something out there. Give us a moment.’

Chippendale, an Oxford Classics don before hostilities began, scanned and rescanned the landscape ahead. He pursed his lips and murmured something inaudible. That was about as enthusiastic as Chips Chippendale ever got. He passed the glasses back to Gerald, who jumped out onto the slipping surface of the dune.

‘Middle distance, skip. Looks like we’ve found it.’

And so they had. They’d been heading straight for the oasis. Without the storm, they might have gone on further to the north, along their original trajectory, and missed it entirely.

‘Ain Suleiman,’ whispered Gerald. ‘Solomon’s Spring.’

Little did he guess what else lay buried in the great sand sea. A secret much greater than a mere oasis or a hidden city, more portentous than a desert route for the fighting and winning of a war, more deadly than Rommel’s tanks or the battalions of Hitler’s Reich.

A puff of wind lifted a plume of sand lower down the western flank of the great dune. Gerald climbed back into the truck.

'Let's go down and take a look,' he said.

Leary swung the wheel, engaged first gear, and let the Chevy topple over the crest to start its slow descent back down to the desert floor.

Ain Suleiman waited for them, wrapped in its age-old silence, the most remote of human habitations.

2

Ain Suleiman

The Western Desert
18th May

As they drove down to the oasis, the sleepy settlement burst into vibrant life, woken by the roar of the patrol's engines. Dogs barked. Men rushed out of low *zaribas*, wrapping their blue veils over their faces. Others ran from further off, where they'd been tending to the camels. They were followed by women in black shawls, and children of all sizes, some clothed, the youngest naked.

With a jolt, Gerald realised he and his men might be the first outsiders these people had ever set their

eyes on, and that the trucks, rushing down from the dune towards them, must seem objects of horror, grim monsters from the depths of whatever hell they believed in. He ordered Leary to stop, and signalled to Bill Donaldson in the following Chevy to pile on the brakes as well. They slid to a stop, their tyres digging hard into the soft sand, where they sank almost to the axles.

‘Switch off the engine,’ Gerald ordered. In the car behind, Donaldson followed suit. A silence fell, as deep as the ocean and as wide, broken only by the braying of camels and the barking of the dogs. Above the oasis, hundreds of little birds flew in circles. In the west, the sun was changing hue as it began its descent to the heat haze that lay stretched across the horizon.

The skipper stepped out, calling on the others to get down too, without weapons.

‘Don’t do anything to startle them,’ he said. ‘Let me do the talking. Clark, stay here and cover us with the machine gun.’

They walked forward. Gerald went in front, striding confidently toward the group of Tuareg men who had formed a defensive line in front of their women and children. They all wore the *tagelmoust*, the elaborate indigo-coloured headdress that covers the head and face but for the eyes.

Gerald turned and beckoned Max Chippendale forward.

‘Max, see the Johnny in front? He belongs to the Imashaghen, the ruling class. The shorter man on his right is their Anislem. The preacher. He’s the one to watch out for. If there’s going to be trouble, he’ll be behind it.’

The Tuareg waited patiently for the five soldiers to reach them. They were tall men, lean, with the keen grey eyes of desert travellers. Behind a handful of Imashaghen stood their vassals, while a group of black slaves cowered with the women and children near the huts. Gerald made a swift calculation. The settlement must number around one hundred souls and some thirty camels.

Walking into the oasis, the soldiers, dry after so long in the open sands, felt the air around them change. The desiccated, searing desert heat turned moist and soft, washing their lungs as if in oil from the olive trees that grew on the far side of the little lake. Gerald breathed in deeply. He knew he would only have moments in which to convince the Tuareg leader of their honourable intentions. At the back of his mind, he calculated what proportion of their rations they could afford to hand over as a token of goodwill. Each of the Tuareg men wore a short sword slung across his left thigh, and Gerald knew they were fierce fighters who could use even these simple weapons to great effect. He noticed that two of the Imashaghen carried rifles over their shoulders, Italian Carcano M91/38 carbines.

If trouble did break out, he and his men had their service pistols, and Teddy Clark was a steady hand on the Browning. But the last thing he wanted was a massacre. If he had to choose between the lives of his patrol and those of anyone trying to kill them, he knew he could make the choice. But he wasn't sure if he could live with it afterwards.

'*Al-salam 'alaykum,*' he called out, using the universal Muslim greeting, and adding in Tamasheq, '*Ma toulid?*'

The man in the centre, inches taller than his brethren, continued to survey him from behind the blue veil, his eyes boring into him, looking neither to right nor left. Gerald stopped and waited for a response.

The Anislem, a Qur'an clutched ostentatiously in his right hand, bent sideways and whispered briefly in his lord's ear. Behind Gerald, the rest of the patrol had come to a halt. He could almost feel their edginess, or perhaps it was just his own. These were men with whom he'd shared the most intense days of his young life. They had fought together; pissed on the same sand; picked fleas from each others' bodies and lice from one another's hair; gone in search of women together in the Berka. They had headed into the desert together time after time, and come out alive again time after time.

Gerald waited patiently for a reply. The men of the desert lived an almost timeless existence, in a world

where little changed from year to year, from century to century. No Tuareg would let himself be hurried.

But the headman had made up his mind.

“*Alaykum al-salam,*” he responded. “*Al-khayr ras, al-hamdu li’llah.*”

Gerald spoke haltingly, explaining who he was and where he and his men had come from. ‘*Min al-Qahira,*’ he said, ‘from Cairo.’ Even this deep in the desert, Cairo was a legend. The Tuareg leader listened impassively, neither warmth nor coldness showing in his eyes. The other Imashaghen watched. No one fidgeted or shuffled or raised a hand to swat the flies that buzzed all round them. These were Kel Tamasheq: as straight as guardsmen, they looked ahead without visible emotion.

‘A people have come to this land who are no friends of the Muslims,’ Gerald said. ‘They despise the Arabs because they belong to an inferior race, they hate the blacks because their skins are not white, they look down on the Berbers and the Tibu and the Kel Tamasheq because they ride on camels. In my language, they are called Germans. My people have come here to wage war with them. If they win this war, they will tear down the mosques, and kill the learned, and make slaves of the Muslims. They will send soldiers into the Ténéré, into the deep sands, they will carry off your wives and children to be slaves in the land they come from, where it is always dark and cold.’

‘My people are not a Muslim people, but we are the greatest nation on earth, and we have been friends to the Muslims wherever we have gone. We have come here to speak with you. We need your help to fight our war, and we bring tokens of our friendship.’

He went on like this for about ten minutes, and not once did the Tuareg betray their feelings. For all he knew, they might be laughing at him. Or planning how to kill him.

The Anislem, a man of learning who had studied the Qur’anic sciences and the Traditions of the Prophet in the now-decayed schools of Timbuktu, watched the infidels intently. His rank was clear from the leather wallets he wore slung across his shoulders, containing a copy of the Qur’an and other sacred writings. From his left hand hung an amber rosary, whose beads he turned and twisted through gnarled fingers. His name was Shaykh Harun agg Da’ud, and he had lived for many years among the Kel Adrar at Ghadames further north. He had long served the people of Ain Suleiman, performing marriages, burying the dead, writing down verses of the Qur’an to wear as amulets, inscribing talismans in the ancient Tifnagh script, guarding the secrets of the oasis. He knew that these strangers, like the Italians he’d met in Ghadames and the French he’d seen in Timbuktu, were a threat to his prestige and authority.

When Gerald came to a halt, the headman remained

silent for a time. He had heard rumours of a war far to the north, but knew nothing of its currents and did not fear its outcome. Perhaps the stranger was telling the truth, perhaps he lied: he was some sort of unbeliever, after all. These were the first unbelievers he had ever set eyes on.

Gerald whispered to Leary, telling him to go back to the trucks with Bill Donaldson, and to bring several items back with them. The silence continued.

When they returned, Leary and Donaldson carried an armful apiece. They laid their offerings on the ground in front of the headman, and stepped back. One by one, Gerald presented an odd mixture of military supplies: two pairs of chapplies, the desert sandals every trooper was issued with; a spare Jerry can; a pair of sand goggles for the headman; the desert stove from Donaldson's vehicle; a folding tent; and a selection of desert rations.

Last of all, Gerald unstrapped his Smith and Wesson .38 and handed it, holster and all, to the headman.

'I will teach you how to fire and reload it,' he said.

The headman did not move. Even the poorest Tuareg had his pride. Gerald waited. On the dunes, sand danced in a light breeze. The fronds on the palm trees whispered. Somewhere, a child cried raucously. It would not be hard to take this place by force, thought Gerald. Each Chevvy carried two air-cooled .30 Browning machine guns. A Waffen-SS commander

might have used them. Gerald fervently prayed he would not have to.

The Tuareg leader stretched out his hand and took the weapon.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘It is much appreciated. As are all these gifts.’

‘There will be more and better if you will give us your help.’

‘My name is Si Musa agg Isa Iskakkghan. I am lord of this oasis. You and your men are welcome to stay. As for these other matters, we shall talk of them later.’

At that moment, a young woman who had been standing with the others in the rear came running forward. She was visibly distressed, and when Gerald looked more closely, he saw that some of the other women were agitated too.

‘Si Musa,’ she called out. ‘Ask the strangers if they have brought medicine. Perhaps they will know how to save our son.’

Si Musa did not turn to look at her. The woman was dark-skinned and pretty, with flashing teeth and large eyes that were red from weeping.

‘Go back to the women, A’isha,’ her husband said. ‘Shaykh Harun has prayed for our child. He will pray again later. If it is God’s will, Yaqub will live. If not, he will die.’

But A’isha did not budge.

‘Let the strangers prove their power, Si Musa. If our child lives, it will be God’s way of showing you that they can be trusted. If he dies...’ she sighed ‘...then they will have to leave.’

Back among the dwellings, the crying of the child redoubled in force. The later sunlight raked the oasis like a purple claw. In the distance, the sand shimmered, conjuring up a mirage, as if crenellated castles danced on the skyline where the dunes and the sky met one another.

Si Musa, inwardly as frightened for his son and heir as his wife, conceded. He turned on his heel and walked back to the encampment, his wife following. Gerald signalled to Donaldson. Donaldson, apart from his driving and navigational skills, was the patrol’s medic. He was a Scot who’d been studying medicine at Edinburgh when war broke out.

‘What’s up, skipper?’ he asked.

‘Fetch the first-aid kit, Bill. Be quick about it. Their child is sick.’

In the headman’s hut, it took only moments for Donaldson to make his diagnosis. The air was cooling as night approached, but he could still feel sweat trickling from his forehead.

‘Tetanus,’ he announced. ‘Quite advanced, by the look of it. The jaw’s rigid, and the bairn has lost weight, I daresay. Ask the mother how long it is since he got the wound.’

He pointed to a wide, unhealed cut on the boy's forearm. It was red and puffy, and the child – he seemed between one and a half and two – had clearly made matters worse by scratching it.

Gerald asked, but no one could tell him exactly how long. In the desert, they counted seasons and years and sometimes months; but days and weeks meant nothing.

In one corner, the holy man had insinuated himself. He watched, his eyes never straying far from the dying child. Beneath his breath, he murmured something, whether a prayer or a curse, Gerald could not tell.

Donaldson unwrapped a glass vial of antitoxin and injected it into the child's arm. The mother, already hopeless, made no protest. Si Musa watched the priest, his shrewd eyes seeking out what was hidden in the old man's heart.

When they left the hut, the sun was setting like a ball of liquid fire, its hues of crimson, rose, gold and turquoise shredded by a billion spores of fine sand that turned them to greens and ochres, vermilion and russets. Fires were lit, using camel dung for fuel. The desert stove was rolled out, and Skinner got it going, surrounded by a bevy of giggling Tuareg women who had never seen a man sully his hands with domestic labour.

A camel was singled out and slaughtered, its hide stripped and set aside, its carcass cut into six parts, and everything that was not eaten preserved for other functions. Bread was baked on fires laid on the sand. Soon, a smell of cooking meat filled the cold night air. Leary showed his hosts how to grill the meat on the petrol-fuelled desert stove. Gerald ordered more rations broken out and made ready for the meal. Bully beef, tinned peaches, rice, potatoes, ten cans of baked beans – great sacrifices that they knew they would regret in the days to come.

In the hut, the baby fell asleep. Donaldson looked tense. He said it would be touch and go, and feared the consequences of his having attempted to treat the child at all.

Elsewhere through the encampment, families were preparing less palatable meals. Tonight's banquet was a sort of state dinner, reserved for the Imashaghen and their guests. The Anislem chose not to partake of the infidel fare, declaring it *haram* and forbidden to Muslims, but he was overruled by Si Musa, who said the food had come from Egypt and that the Egyptians were a Muslim people. Shaykh Harun slunk away to find food more fitting his status, but Gerald noticed that he moved back again under cover of darkness, and remained on the edge of the circle, no doubt listening intently to all that was said.

They ate well. What would have seemed poor rations in another time and place made a great feast for poor desert dwellers and soldiers. The camel was stringy, the meat was undercooked, and sand had drifted into everything. But no one complained. They washed the gritty food down with green tea, brewed three times, each brew weaker and sweeter than the one before.

The conversation was choppy, limited by the great linguistic gulf that separated the soldiers from the Tuareg. Questions were relayed through Gerald and Si Musa, answers given in the same way. It was cumbersome, but both parties gained a little understanding of one another. Throughout the meal, however, all participants were aware of a dull underlying tension, of the silence that emanated from the headman's hut, of the baby that did not cry and whose death might at any moment be pronounced. The Tuareg passed round pinches of snuff from little containers they carried round their necks, and Donaldson raided the cigarette ration, handing over packs of Senior Service coffin nails as though they were sweeties. Some of the Tuareg had smoked before, others subsided into fits of coughing.

There was music afterwards, and dancing, the men in one group, the women in another, their swaying movements lit by fires fuelled by dung laced with

petrol. Beneath a sky so packed with stars it seemed a dome of silver and ebony, the sharp percussive notes of the *tindi* drum echoed through the sands like gunshots, softened only by the gentle scraping of two *imzads*. And then, out of nowhere, appeared a man wearing a white veil and carrying a flute. One by one, the dancers stopped and the instruments fell silent. The flute player began to play, softly at first, then with growing vigour, as if he wooed the stars; and as he played an ochre moon appeared above the horizon and rose into the shining firmament. As it climbed into the night sky, it shed its ochre tones and grew silver like the stars.

The music stopped, everyone clapped, and it was time for bed. The flute player came across to Gerald, and said he looked forward to speaking at greater length in the morning. It was Si Musa. Gerald said goodnight, and explained that he and his men planned to spend the night, as they always did, next to their vehicles.

They moved the Chevvy's onto flat ground on the other side of the oasis from the Tuareg huts.

'Time for a powwow, gentlemen,' said Gerald as soon as they'd checked things over and were rolling out their sleeping bags on the sand. It was bitterly cold: the day's heat had long vanished. Moonlight lay across the dunes, giving them the appearance

of sheets of ice. Wrapped up in their Tropol coats, the men were tired and cold and looking forward to getting back to Cairo. A groan went up as Gerald spoke. Powwows could stretch into the night.

‘We’ve got to radio back to base tonight. If anything happens to us, this will all have been wasted if we don’t get the coordinates through. We’ll take an astrofix now. The rest of you can be setting the aerials up.’

Skinner, Clark, Donaldson and Leary clustered round the radio car, setting two tall poles to front and rear, rigging the support lines, and stringing the dipole antenna between the poles. While they were struggling to get the aerial set up, Gerald and Max Chippendale took out the theodolite and screwed it onto its tripod.

Max put a wide wooden board beneath the tripod legs and spent the next five minutes with a plumb bob trying to get the instrument absolutely flat.

‘Who the fuck thought you could use one of these on sand?’ he swore, as he did every time he had to get it straight. He fiddled with the legs, tightening and loosening, while Gerald lit the tripod with his Kempthorne torch, one he’d ‘liberated’ from an Aussie patrol.

‘OK, skipper. It’s as plumb as I can get it.’

He put his eye to the theodolite’s telescope and picked out a star.

'Up,' he called out as the star moved across the lens. Gerald noted the time, using his chronometer.

Back at the radio car, Leary had his receiver buzzing. He twisted dials until the time signal came through from Big Ben, and Gerald confirmed the coordinates. He dictated a brief message to Leary, who encrypted it and transmitted the result to Kufra.

'Let's have a spot of swing, Weary,' someone said, and other voices joined in, calling for music before they settled down, a desert custom. Leary's wireless ranged from 4.2 to 7.5MHz and could pick up most short-wave broadcasts. He twiddled the dial and caught Glenn Miller's band halfway through 'In the Mood'. Clark found the rum pot and doled out rations to keep the cold at bay. No one declined.

Next thing, Peggy Lee was singing her new hit with the Benny Goodman sextet, 'Full Moon'. Above them, the moon moved majestically through its field of stars, the twenty-eight lunar mansions, through al-Haq'a, al-Han'a and al-'Adhara, past stars and planets named by the Arabs centuries ago. The song ended, and Leary moved the dial again, this time picking up Radio Belgrade. They listened uncomprehending to a barrage of German propaganda, but everyone knew what they were waiting for. They weren't disappointed. A record crackled briefly, then the airwaves were filled with the lush voice of Lale Anderson, the German Angel of the Soldiers.

*‘Vor der Kaserne
 Vor dem grossen Tor
 Stand eine Lanterne
 Und steht sie noch davor...
 Wie einst Lili Marleen.’*

For all the English versions that had been recorded, the *auf Deutsch* original was the anthem of all the British troops in the desert. Some hummed, others listened silently. The desert swallowed the music and the silence equally. There was this moment in every day when they sat and thought of home and the nearness of violent death. The song ended, and Leary switched off the wireless.

Gerald drank the last sip of rum and put his mug back on the car. As he did so, he saw a dark figure coming towards the cars from the encampment. He reached for his pistol, then remembered what he’d done with it.

‘Chips!’ he hissed. ‘Someone’s coming. Maybe more than one. Tell the others.’

He jumped into the car and crouched behind the Browning. The figure moved rapidly across the sand, half shadow, half reflected moonlight. It didn’t seem to be making any effort to conceal itself.

He let the shadow come within several yards of the car, then shouted ‘Stop!’ in Tamasheq. The figure came to a halt.

'I must speak to your lord.' It was a woman's voice. Relieved, Gerald told her to come forward.

'Is something wrong?' he asked. Donaldson had left the child sleeping after the dancing, and said there was nothing more he could do for him. Either the antitoxin worked or the child died. Had the woman come to tell them he was dead?

'My name is A'isha,' she said. 'Si Musa's wife. Is the doctor here?'

'Donaldson,' called Gerald, 'I think you'd better come over. It's the headman's wife. She wants to speak with you.'

Donaldson's heart was thumping. He knew how much might hinge on this one small life. As he came out of the shadows that encircled the second car, the woman broke away and ran to him, throwing herself onto the sand at his feet and grabbing his legs, sobbing and laughing simultaneously. Amidst the tears and laughter, broken words escaped her lips.

'Bloody hell, Bill, I think the kid pulled through. She thinks you're a miracle worker. Next best thing to God.'

And so it transpired. When she finally collected herself, she told Gerald that her son had come out of his sleep hungry and asking for food. She'd given him some leftovers from the meal, and he'd kept them down. The doctor raised her to her feet and clapped her on the shoulders.

‘No one else knows,’ she said. ‘Just my sisters. I came to tell you first. To thank you for saving his life. I am in your debt. My husband, my son, and myself will for ever be in your debt.’

Flustered, Donaldson said he would come to see the boy right away. But A’isha put up a hand and shook her head.

‘He’s sleeping again,’ she said. ‘Before you see him, you must come with me. All of you. You must be rewarded.’

They looked at one another awkwardly, assuming she meant that she would share her sexual favours with them. Gerald explained that they wanted no reward, that hearing of the child’s survival was sufficient reward in itself.

She continued to shake her head.

‘I know why you came to Ain Suleiman. Everyone knows. Shaykh Harun says you must be killed before you find what you are looking for. But you have given my son back his life, so I will take you there. I will take you there tonight. It isn’t far.’

Gerald looked at her, not understanding.

‘We came to find Ain Suleiman. That is all we sought.’

‘I know what you came to find,’ she said. ‘I will show you. The sands have moved in the storm. There is much to see.’

‘What is this thing?’ Gerald asked.

‘It is not a thing,’ she said. ‘It is a city. The city of Wardabaha. I will walk there with you now. Before the moon sets. I will take you to the hall of the sleepers, where the Old Ones sleep. I cannot go all the way inside, none of us can. But you are angels. Come with me. Come to Wardabaha.’

3

The City of Wardabaha

Leary stayed by the radio in case base tried to make contact. Skinner had already been placed on sentry duty: he manned one of the Brownings, with a Very flare to hand if it turned out that the whole thing was a ploy on the part of the Tuaregs to raid the cars. The others set out with torches, following A'isha across the silver landscape. Not a word was said by anyone. Their feet sank in the soft sand, leaving impressions that were at once filled by moonlight, like mercury flowing into hollows. A white lizard, startled by the light, ran across their path and vanished.

They did not go far, a quarter of a mile at most. Their

minds set on a desert city, on towers and battlements, on domes and minarets, on ancient stairways and the inevitable ruin of things once lovely and blessed, they saw nothing at first. When A'isha's voice rang out, telling them they had arrived, they looked and saw only dunes with more dunes behind them, moonlight with moonlight following.

Then A'isha took Gerald by the arm and led him forward. The others followed, all certain by now that they'd been tricked, that the woman had, out of treachery or high spirits, fooled them or betrayed them. Chips wanted to turn back, thinking the Tuaregs had duped them in order to loot the cars, fearing Leary and Skinner might already be dead. Yet there had been no shooting, no shouts, no hint of any activity behind them.

And then something altered, as though the landscape itself had undergone a great change or things magical become evident to the material eye. Just to his right, Gerald saw what looked like a human figure, a woman draped in clinging fabric. In a flash, he saw she had no head, and in the same moment realised it was a statue. Behind him Max Chippendale whistled.

'Holy Hercules!'

He walked up to it, content to let the moonlight serve for illumination.

'Roman,' he said. 'Roman and this far south, it doesn't make sense.'

‘Over here, Dr Chippendale,’ called Teddy Clark, reverting quite naturally to the don’s civilian title.

Teddy had stumbled on a lion’s head carved from marble, its nostrils flared, its eyes wide open, its luxuriant mane sculpted with great delicacy.

They went on, crossing between two dunes, and now a new world opened before their awestruck eyes. Pillars, some broken, others still topped by carvings of acanthus leaves, sprang from the sand. To one side, there was a fallen archway linked to another by a round face surrounded by what seemed to be long, wreathing curls.

‘Medusa,’ whispered Chippendale. Not curls of hair, he said, but serpents chiselled into it so finely they might yet have moved. Moonlight trickled across the face, blanching it, making it appear lit from within.

Max wandered among the ruins, mesmerised, at every step reminded of the great Roman sites to the north: Leptis Magna, Ptolemais, Sabratha. Libya, known then as Cyrenaica, had been one of the greatest provinces of the Roman Empire, producing grain, livestock, and a vast array of medicinal plants. The trade in silphium alone had made the province rich. Ancient Libya had boasted amphitheatres, baths, forums, villas – all the rich panoply of an imperial success story.

‘I’m only guessing at this point,’ Max said as he ran his fingers down the fluted side of a rose granite column, ‘but I reckon this place dates from sometime

after the imperial cult was brought here. Say around AD 70, up through Trajan's rule, maybe to AD 100 or a bit after. This is really a guess, though. There could be much later buildings. There might be anything buried in the sand. It just depends how long this place was active.'

'Is there really no record of a place like this?' Gerald asked.

Max shrugged.

'No idea. I've done my reading about Roman Africa, but I'm no expert. There could be a record, but I've never come across it. All the same, there's something at the back of my mind. Maybe it'll come to me.'

It was Clark who stumbled on the doorway. Young Teddy Clark, a fair-faced lad from Kent, a farmer's son, barely out of school, and lost in a desert of stone and gravel, far from the green fields of his father's farm. His sharp eyes picked it out from the sand, and he ran to it, calling the others to him.

The half-open door lay on the sheltered face of a dune, protected from the prevailing winds. Two fluted rectangular columns stood to either side, rising to over six feet, where they were crossed by a stone lintel on which had been carved an inscription in Greek, partly obscured by sand. At both ends of the lintel the engraver had placed a rosette with six narrow petals, flanked by stylised palm trees.

But it was the door itself that took Max

Chippendale's breath away. It was a bronze door made of two halves. On the right-hand panel a skilled hand had limned in gold a faithful likeness of a seven-branched candlestick, and on the left side, matching it in skill and fidelity, the embossed image of a cross, and on this latter, writing in Hebrew. The left-hand side had been pushed back, leaving a narrow opening that a child might have passed through.

Astonished by this incongruity, Max raised his hand to the entablature and brushed away the sand that had stuck to the lintel. One by one, the letters came into view, each chiselled neatly into the stone.

Gerald came up close and stared at the inscription. The others gathered round. A'isha stood to one side, as though frightened to go any closer.

'I don't understand,' said Gerald. 'I thought this was a Roman place. What's a Greek inscription doing up there?'

'Can you read it?' asked Max.

'Not without a dictionary. Never was much good at Greek in school.'

'Well, you might also ask yourself what that Hebrew writing is doing on the cross. That, I'm afraid I cannot help you with. But the Greek's more straightforward. The Romans still used Greek in Egypt and Cyrenaica. There's nothing odd about it at all. It's the Hebrew that's bloody odd, and the candlestick. Jewish obviously. Next to a Christian symbol. Most peculiar.'

‘Yes, I can see that. Can you read what it says?’

Donaldson had brought an oil lamp from his car and now held it up. The flickering flame cast light and shadow across the square epigraphy.

Max ran his eyes across the Greek letters, thought for a moment, then translated:

In the second year of the emperor Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, on the seventh of Tammuz, this doorway of the proseuchê was erected by the congregation of the Ebonyim of Ain Shelomo by order of the archisynagogos Dositheos, son of Ammonius and the archiprostates Zenion, son of Zoilos.

‘That’s about it,’ he said.

‘When was that?’ asked Teddy Clark. ‘The second year of Trajan.’

Max did a quick calculation.

‘Sometime in 100 AD. Trajan became emperor in January 98. The month is odd, though. Tammuz. It’s a Jewish month. If I’m not mistaken, *proseuchê* is an alternative word for a synagogue. This Dositheos would have been the leader of the synagogue.’

‘It can’t be a synagogue,’ commented Donaldson. ‘There’s the wee matter of a cross on the door.’

Max shrugged.

‘I think you may be in for a surprise,’ he answered.

‘What’s that mean?’

‘I’m not sure. But I think we have to go inside, don’t you?’

They looked at one another, at faces dim in the moonlight, then at the darkness in the doorway.

‘Will it open, do you suppose?’ asked Gerald.

The door seemed frozen in place, trapped ajar beneath a mountain of sand, its interior buried for ever under the weight of the desert, its secrets hidden in permanent shadow.

Max brushed sand away from the embossed images on the door, then ran his hand softly along the open edge. He felt old sand, old dirt, an accumulation of grime that century upon century had laid there.

‘There’s one way to find out,’ he said. And he began to push the left-hand wing inwards. The others lent a hand and, to their surprise, the door offered little resistance. The gap between the bottom edge and the floor was wide enough to let the wing travel, grinding on sand, yet pushing whatever sand lay behind it away.

When the opening had been enlarged enough to let them enter, Max took one of the torches and led the way inside. A moonbeam followed him, a pale, milky wash of molten alabaster flowing across a dark layer of sand. Gerald told Clark to stay on guard duty outside.

‘Keep an eye on A’isha,’ he said. ‘I still don’t trust her.’

But when he looked round, the young woman was no longer there. He swung the beam of his torch around

the nearest dunes, but there was no sign of her.

‘Call us if anything happens, Clark,’ Gerald ordered. ‘Anything.’

He stepped inside.

It was as if, in that single step, he had been transported from one world to another, like a man who, falling from the gunwales of a ship at sea, passes at once into the waves and is taken by water down to infinite depths. In the first moments of falling, he has no sense of the transition that is to come, and no true picture of how deep and cold the ocean is. Thus it was for Gerald Usherwood, and after him his companions, as he stepped from the desert into a sea built of stone and the webs of small incessant spiders.

The room he stepped into was lightless. No opening existed in its roof that might have let moonlight or starlight through. It had, he realised at once, been dark like this for centuries, lit only partly in the day by the passing rays of the desert sun. It was no colder here than outside, and no warmer. But as his torch picked out walls and the shadowed recesses of a high ceiling, the vast spaces of the desert, through which he seemed to have been travelling for years, dwindled to the confines of an ancient room, an antechamber that would lead him deeper inside this inner place, this inmost of all places.

For centuries, the legs of orb-weaver and sheet-web spiders had crossed and recrossed the chamber,

leaving everywhere fine cobwebs in the darkness. As the moving light of Gerald's torch caught them, living spiders scuttled to whatever shadow they could find. A camel spider six inches long scurried from its nightly hiding place to a crevice between wall and floor. Gerald held to the centre of the room, knowing there would be scorpions in the cracks and interstices of the walls.

Max joined him silently, and together they began to pick out the features of the entrance hall.

The hall was supported at either end by four Ionic columns. One side wall carried a stone plaque inscribed in Hebrew, and its counterpart, opposite, a similar plaque bearing an inscription in Latin. The walls behind and in front were decorated with dozens of elegant mosaics. Among them all, one right ahead stood out. It glistened in the cold beams of their torches, burning with tesserae of white and red and blue and gold. It showed a great building set on a hill, a building of white stone that rose upon steep steps on every side. It was surrounded by battlements, with towers on each corner and a great courtyard in front. The central edifice towered above these, tipped by gold along the roof, and supported on columns whose capitals were of gold. A tall doorway led into darkness. In the sky above, angels flew on golden wings, and in the silence they could almost hear the wings whisper.

Gerald went up to the mosaic and touched it,

running his fingers gently over the tesserae.

‘It’s as if it was made yesterday,’ he said in a hushed voice. ‘As if the artist had walked away moments ago and is still in hailing distance. Look at the gold. The tiles are glass with gold foil behind. This was made in the middle of a desert.’

Max was still staring at the mosaic from a few feet away.

‘It’s the Temple,’ he said.

‘Temple?’

Max hesitated. He stepped closer to the mosaic and, like Gerald, ran his fingers over the gold and shining tesserae. He spoke in a quiet voice, but they all heard him clearly.

“And now Herod, in the eighteenth year of his reign...undertook a very great work, that is, to build of himself the temple of God, and make it larger in compass, and to raise it to a most magnificent altitude, as esteeming it to be the most glorious of all his actions to bring it to perfection; and that this would be sufficient for an everlasting memorial of him.”

‘This is the second Temple, built over Solomon’s Temple. The Romans burnt it to the ground when they destroyed Jerusalem in the year seventy – about thirty years before the inscription outside. The people who built this would have been Jews who fled from the city. A great many wound up in Egypt and Cyrenaica. And if I remember correctly, they came south.’

‘What’s the cross about, then?’ asked Donaldson.

‘I think that’s your answer,’ Max said, and turned his torch to a nearby panel on the same wall. This mosaic showed a very different scene: a man bent beneath a Roman cross, stumbling as he carried it, with bystanders, some jeering, some running to help.

‘This doesn’t make any sense,’ the doctor exclaimed. His Calvinist upbringing in Aberdeen had given him an allergy to icons. His father would have called the mosaic a ‘work of the de’il’, and his mother would have sat sucking her thumbs and muttering ‘idol worship’ beneath her breath. ‘Why would Jews put a picture of the good Lord on the wall of their synagogue?’

‘Ah!’ said Max, trying to keep any hint of smugness out of his voice. ‘But that’s not Jesus Christ in the mosaic.’

‘Who else could it be?’

‘Haven’t you read your Bible? “They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.” There were Jews from Cyrenaica in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and some of the first Christians were converts from Libya, also from Cyrenaica. Simon and his sons were among them.’

‘How do you know this is Simon?’

Max pointed to an inscription at the base of the picture.

‘Because it says so. That’s Jesus standing behind him.’