

The Iraq Incantation

An excerpt from the novel

Wilderness of Mirrors

by Nicholas Hallum

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IRAQI DESERT SKYRISE SECURE OPERATION

The CIA team bought black Land Rovers from a car dealership in Beirut on the first day, with American money laundered through the Syrian-funded group now calling itself “*Hzbollah*” and no one caring for business receipts in those heady mission-driven days right after 9/11. Cash was available, and the mission trumped all other concerns. The team departed Damascus on the second day, with the idea they would drive through *Ad Dumayr* before crossing the Iraqi border and moving to points east in the uncharted desert. They drove on a line drawn on a map by Ishmael, the CIA station chief in Beirut, a man who had a compass, an out-of-date U.S. made cartographic map from World War II, and no sense of direction.

The out of shape chair monkeys around him turned red as lobsters and sweated profusely when the air conditioning was turned off to preserve gasoline. None of them had been prepared for a Special Forces-style Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, but here they were.

Then of course there was Peter himself. This was a young man’s journey, heading into the heart of the Arabic Empty Quarter, and he was no young man. By the end of the third day, they’d dug the tires out of the soft desert dirt twelve times and Peter’s calves ached with a deep abiding pain. Yet in comparison with the CIA men along for this ride, he was in comparatively good shape. Despite the sun and the work, he was sadly in better shape than half the CIA personnel.

They were desk baboons, out of their cubicle jungle, trapped out here in the middle of the Syrian Desert, approaching the uttermost limits of the Iraqi desert. Most of them would be lucky to

Spies & Sorcery 43 never have to hike two days straight in the desert. For all he knew, they’d once been trained as great strategic thinkers at Harvard and Stanford. But he knew these noobs would never survive.

Peter kept playing that morbid game in his head: *who would survive?* Besides himself and Ishmael, there was the silent European man with the Chinese wife back home. He had been trained by the Spetnatz, but he was always silent, always watching. Hendrick was his name: he might make it.

Peter shook his head every time the Land Rovers choked on dust. Here he was, at fifty-one years old, on a damned cowboy adventure in a war zone, still being forced to hump over-weighted cars out of desert potholes.

Hours after they left the half-maintained roads of Jordan, road one hundred and seventy miles east of Beirut, Peter glimpsed the figure of a man in the distance ahead – a figure waiting for them in a traditional *keffiyeh* lounging against the side of a weather-beaten Toyota pulled to the verge of the dusty expanse.

Peter had read the files of all the agents they could have deployed in this region – he had read many of their emails and listened to their phone calls as well. There were a variety of Syrian mercenaries they could have called upon as guides – and some ex-PLO Jordanians who might also be helpful in these famished places. There was supposed to be a private CIA deal with the Israelis to provide them with a desert guide who would be freed from prison to take them deep into Iraq.

So on the road ahead, he was prepared for any number of hungry desert guerrillas, strong from long labor, raw and desperate from Israeli interrogation. But as they approached nearer and nearer to the man standing resolutely beside the car, Peter began to think that it wasn't a mercenary or a PLO fighter that their CIA team had hired at all.

The man standing resolutely against the old white car looked indeed to be Professor Mahmoud El-Amin, the Arabic scholar Peter had last seen two weeks ago in Prague. Peter had last seen the scholar in a dusty Café by the St. Charles Bridge, but he looked rather different now, on the open lonely road outside of Beirut. First, the red-checked Bedouin *keffiyeh* wrapped around his head and the traditional *djellaba* he wore transformed him into a denizen of the desert. Even his posture was more vigilant, like a desert vulture – Peter would not have been surprised to see an AK-47 held casually in his hands.

After their posse of Land Rovers slid to a halt, Mahmoud was instructed by the CIA chief – Ishmael – to leave his car behind. But the Arabic scholar demurred: he asked for payment for the ratty old car. Peter was again surprised – the scholar negotiated like an Egyptian market shopkeeper, with a gameful ferocity of purpose.

First Mahmoud described, with great dramatic flourishes, how the car had served him and his family well for nearly a decade, and now it would be left behind. The desert dust and sand would drift over it in a matter of days, and the wind-blown grains would strip the poor, abandoned vehicle down to the bare bones of its mechanical skeleton. Mahmoud – and his car, and his family going back three generations – could not abide such shameful treatment. By the time he finished, it was a matter affecting his great-grandfather's honor.

“*In'shallah, in'shallah* – show me mercy – in the end, there will be nothing left to me,” he wailed. “Save the word of the prophet, blessed be his Name.”

Finally, after much arbitration and negotiation, Ishmael named a very high sum that Mahmoud agreed to, and he jumped in a Land-Rover without a glance backward at the dented Toyota. After that, they kept moving across the desert with the professor in the backseat, crammed behind Peter and two CIA men who reeked of days-old sweat and halitosis.

Mahmoud, in contrast, smelled sweetly aromatic, coriander burnt in the sun. He slipped the CIA payment – in U.S. dollars – into the pocket of his *djellaba* and settled back into his seat, sans seat-belt. Then he turned to Peter.

“*As-salamu alaykum,*” Mahmoud greeted him. “We are a long way from St. Charles Bridge, are we not, my friend?”

“*Wa alaykumu s-salam wa rahmatullah.*” Peter gave the extended form of the greeting reply, as an acknowledgement of their comradeship. May the peace and mercy of Allah come to you also.

Mahmoud gave a broken-toothed grin as Peter fumbled the Egyptian pronunciation. “I do not know if we will find peace and mercy here, my friend, and I hope that God is with us, but I do not know, *in’shallah.*”

On the next day out from Jordan, the CIA’s Jordanian station chief received an encrypted signal from Washington. The orders arrived at four a.m. – and the orders said to split the team. On this day, the majority of the team was to go overland to the north – *shamal* – into the border region controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Al-Qaeda affiliated group *Ansar-al-Islam*. They were to collect intel on Ansar activities, document the al-Qaeda fighters they found and discover if there were any chemical or biological weapons in the villages in northern Iraq.

Mahmoud and Peter were to be left behind with supplies, but no transportation. Ishmael, the CIA officer, looked concerned. While the other men worked yet again to dig the Land Rovers out of a rut in the road, Ishmael walked with them to a vantage point outside of range from their camp. “Apparently, you’re dead to me now. No communication. No rescue even if you guys are in trouble. Some kind of double-blind black op you’re on, I guess.”

He turned to Peter, his face gray as a corpse in the early morning light. Ishmael looked down at the encrypted tablet on which he’d received the orders. “Here’s the thing,” he said softly. “Whenever you reach the rendezvous point the Bedouin are taking you to, you’re supposed to activate your beacon, and paint the target bright. You can communicate then, right? Keep your GPS live from that point out, you copy?”

Peter nodded. A glance at Muhmad showed him nothing.

Ishmael’s voice dropped to an even lower whisper. He shook the tablet nervously, as if the orders might change. “You have to wait there until you get a signal confirmation from the forces in Kuwait. They’ll send out a division of the 10th Special Forces Group.”

“On your signal, they’re sending them across the border – that’s an act of war – so you better be damn sure you’ve got the right spot, and you’re ready to kick off this fuck’ng party. Operation Iraqi Freedom will start when you turn it on.”

Peter looked down at his GPS unit. A signal from that device would start the cascade. That’s what was making this man nervous: a war would start on Peter’s word.

“You send your signal, then we’ll see the elephant,” said Ishmael. “You copy?”

See the elephant. Peter recalled the phrase from his early days in training in the Army Signal Intelligence School in the 1970s. Even in the modern era, centuries after Hannibal’s elephant-led invasion of Asia, military men still described the onset of warfare as the moment one saw the elephant – a shocking advent of destruction. Once war began, the momentum became unavoidable, it became a power in itself, thunderous and terrible as any earthquake.

On the next afternoon, as they came into a desert *wadi*, there were riders on camels in the distance. He squinted, trying to ensure this was not another sun-spot apparition. Peter watched as the camels lolloped across the desert toward them, driven on by cries of ‘*hut, hut!*’ and ‘*yalla, yalla!*’

Two camels with empty saddles were yoked to their train: one for Peter and one for Mahmoud. They came quickly into the *wadi*. The men slowly unbent themselves and swung off their stringy-muscled steeds.

“*Al kuwa,*” said one of the riders, speaking *badawi*, Bedouin Arabic, his voice coarse and gravelly from desert dust. God give you strength.

“*Allah-i-gauik.*” Mahmoud gave the traditional reply. God strengthen you.

After that exchange, the Bedouin men did not ask for their encrypted identification codes or mention any of the protocols that had been discussed in far-off Washington D.C. Such identifiers mattered little in such a wasteland. After the greeting, the Bedouin turned to their priorities of water from the deep wadi well for their camels, grain and dry grass measured out in small quantities, and the treatment of small wounds and abrasions on their camels’ legs.

Mahmoud was left to explain who they were, and he did so in the Egyptian manner, by reference to their familial heritage. “Bedu,” said Mahmoud. “They are Kufra Bedouin, Sanusi, descendants of the Banu Sulaim.”

Peter watched the men work in their careful manner. Their camel’s legs mattered, and the feeding of the beasts, and then the cleanliness of the water, and after all that was done, only then did they see to their own feeding, and water and comfort.

Matters of sustenance and survival were of infinitely higher importance to these men than the implosion of some distant skyscrapers. For centuries, tribespeople such as these had trickled through the desert's too-porous boundaries – just as they did in the 1960s with Kim Philby and Robinson Gale – just as they had done forever, through the vagaries and incursions of the World Wars. Peter wondered if such Bedu tribesmen who wandered the desert terrain between Jordan and Mecca, even cared which nation they were in any more. They ranged freely over the great escarpment of the Arabian Peninsula, and further north, crossing the Sinai and into Egypt and the great southern Sahara desert, crossing without regard for the national borders of such recent “countries” as Syria and Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Even now, as this new highly vaunted “War on Terror” disrupted nation states across the region, the destination of these people would always be the horizon – their strategic goals the next well, the next *wadi*, the next grazing for their sheep and camels. The Bedouin might play a part for a time, but the next move in the great game was for such travelers only a momentary pulse in the great and everlasting current of the desert.

As the sun set across the expanse of wasteland, the men somehow produced a live lamb from their packs. A small snuffling white thing, seemingly nearly comatose from its day-long journey on the back of a camel. With words that sounded like a muffled oath, one of the men struck the head off of the lamb – an act that came as a shock to Peter because the violence came with no warning – and the man held the blood draining onto the ground in a shaking circle but without interest or enthusiasm.

Yet as Peter watched the lamb's blood splash out in a shaky circle around the edge of the *wadi*, passages he'd read as a child came to him: the lamb sacrificed for the sins of the people, the wave offering and the meat offering. This was the land, this was the world in which such sacrifices were done, and here they were not abnormal at all, but every day.

Moments later, the lamb was skinned, the fleshy meat impaled on sticks, sizzling over the blazing fire. They ate in the traditional Arab manner, using their hands to dip the meat and the bread into sauces and spices on its way to their hungry mouths.

Satiated, Peter sat back part way through the meal and watched the men laugh and talk and trade stories with one another. His Arabic was very good, but these men spoke in the accents of the deep wastelands of Syria, and it was hard to catch their meaning.

Mahmoud saw the same. “The desert abides, and the Bedu abide, in the care of *Allah*, most merciful, most bountiful,” he murmured. Peter knew what he meant, for as they watched the camels step carefully through the desert, Peter felt himself out of time.

It occurred to him that foreign travelers had come here for nearly a century, caught in the wasteland, sending signals up to bounce off the ionosphere, sending signals home. Even T.E. Lawrence had used radio, ancient vacuum tube contraptions. Hypothetically some of his signals still bounced around the ionosphere, degraded now beyond deciphering.

The journey took seven days. Slow plodding on camelback, no wasted energy or effort under the hot sun and the frigid nights. For it was January – winter here too, in this latitude – and in the Iraqi desert, the temperature dropped precipitously in the late hours. Peter found himself thinking of the T.S. Eliot poem, a description of another journey in the middle of winter. He muttered those words at dawn, as they all crawled groaning and shivering out of their bedrolls. “*Ahlan, what do you say?*” said Mahmoud.

Peter spread his arms, and said Eliot’s words loudly like an invocation, as dawn came across the horizon:

“A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year.” He skipped the part about summer palaces and silken girls bringing sherbet. Not so useful to think of now. *“A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, Sleeping in snatches, With the voices singing in our ears, saying That this was all folly.”*

Peter stumbled. “I forget the middle,” he said. “It ends with *“I should be glad of another death.”*”

Mahmoud grimaced at him. “I thought you would offer words of hope, not such dark sounds. You drink too much poetry.” He gave Peter a look, mingled disgust and compassion, and packed up his bedroll. After a moment, he handed him a steaming cup of the dark Turkish coffee, their breakfast, such as it was.

The Bedouin had a destination in mind and kept them moving through the hot hours and through dusk and sunset and into the next night. As the sky darkened, the stars above grew from pinpricks of light to a sweeping constellation, a river of sparkling brightness. Peter glanced upward and shivered as he sensed a flickering uncertainty in the wavelength of light, a vibration that caused the night sky itself to seem to waver for a moment. He looked down, watching his camel make its careful way across the dim desert landscape.

Finally, they made their destination. They had come to a new *wadi* – a well or small oasis – at a rocky place the Bedouin called Ba’al Hadad, or in the ancient Semitic languages, the place of the worship of *Hadad*, the storm and rain god of the ancient Sumerians. However, the well at Hadad was dry and useless to them – it was filled with stones and sharp bits of grit. The weariness of the day took much from them, and they had no energy to search for other water now.

“The Bedu say this dry well is where Moses watered his sheep, a thousand years ago,” said Mahmoud after consulting the Bedouin. “He was a shepherd, you know?”

“It was longer ago than that,” said Peter. “And he was more than that.” He pictured the Moses portrayed in the illustrated Bible he’d read as a child, holding a flaming rod of power, calling down the angel of death upon the Egyptians.

In the dark hours at Ba'al Hadad, night terrors came on Peter. Not insomnia, but instead terrible dreams of cannibalism and worse. An hour before dawn, the sky was a deep blue, like the bottom of the ocean, and Peter was unable to even try to sleep.

Finally, when he turned his flashlight on, he could see bones all around their campsite. Human bones, slick and raw and warm to the touch still: and the bones were distributed in rotating patterns, creating vast unnatural vertices and graphs, the shapes out of sync with human geometry or natural ability.

He put his light across the dead fire, towards the hobbled camels, on the other side of the huge stone. But the camels were gone too, every one of their bones stripped bare and distributed around the campsite as well.

Something moved across the great stone shelf of the Ba'al Hadad. He flinched only to realize that it was merely desert mice – jerboa – hopping among the bones, their random movements startling him afresh.

He turned desperately towards Mahmoud's bedroll: but Mahmoud was alive, and snoring happily in his sleep, oblivious to the world. Peter turned back to the pillaged campsite. At the outskirts of the camp, he could hear a great wind beginning to rise, hissing and spitting as it came closer.

Among the scattered bones, he found the men's clothing, separated thread by thread.

Colonel Schwarzkopf had told him this hard truth in Washington D.C. before they departed: "We'll arrange for an enticing offering, one that will be willingly devoured." Peter winced to remember that statement now. He had known all along, in his heart of hearts, how few might return. He thought of their families, the wives and children they had mentioned back in Jordan and Syria. If their families were confronting him now, what would he say? He doubted that he could appeal to the "cost of freedom" as a justification for his actions.

The wind was rising over the stone slab: the desert preternaturally calm in the pre-dawn darkness.

Peter quivered with unshakeable fear: his hands trembled and shook as he desperately dug through their belongings. He had to upend their packs on the dirt before he found the military-issue short-wave radio that they'd been given, for use only in emergencies. He had to search again for the frequency code, and finally found that in his wallet, where he'd placed it for safe-keeping nearly a month ago, when he was safe in Alexandria, Virginia.

His fingers shook so much he had to take multiple stabs at the "On" button on the short-wave. Finally, he hit it, and he turned the dial to set the frequency. He plunged the tiny speaker on its wire into his ear. Static surged in waves on his radio, screeching sounds rising and falling as he tuned in. Mahmoud stirred and opened his eyes, looking at him in concern.

As if in response to the sound on the radio, the wind around him gusted, the dust and dirt of their campsite wavering in the air. He glanced away from the great stone shelf of Ba'al Hadad on the

horizon. He had the weird sensation that a sandstorm was coming their way, even though they were several thousand miles from the open Arabian desert of the Empty Quarter. A static storm was rising on his short-wave, a raspy buzz of nonsense filling the spectrum. He felt as if he were standing askilter on the world, his feet or his head askew, and now he could hear in his head that apocalyptic sonnet of John Donne's, the words echoed eerily in his brain:

*At the round earth's imagined corners blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, ARISE
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go ;
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,*

Static crashed in his head. He felt himself mesmerized by the oncoming sound of the wind. There was an illness in his inner ear, nausea and dizziness overwhelming him. He fumbled again at the frequency, hoping to hear the station numbers come in clear. He found himself muttering words he only half-understood: "*All whom the flood did... war, death, age, agues, tyrannies...*"

He tuned the dial back and forth, trying to raise the station despite the black spots that filled his vision, the disorienting ebb and flow of his pulse in his veins. He felt as if a whirling thing were moving through him, edging hard against the rhythm of his heart. He punched the access code in, the Morse code bits falling out of his fingers as he peered at the paper: *dit, dash, dit dit, dash, dit dit*. The solidity of the Morse calmed him. The military would take care of this, just thinking of the efficiency of the military calmed Peter down.

Despite his dizziness, rising nausea, and uncertainty, he saw that Mahmoud was awake now. But he was muttering archaic Arabic words Peter could not understand, eyes closed as if in concentration. Perhaps he was praying. When Peter touched him, he found himself pushed back by static electricity, as if something were grounded there, like a high-tension electrical wire sending power popping and hissing as it ran current into the ground unnaturally.

A voice spoke in his ear, a sound he did not expect to hear. "Acknowledged. Enter validation code, ID: Strike Wanda Forty-Two."

Peter found himself breathing faster at the sound of the military voice, and he fumbled the first time he entered the code, and had to re-enter it. The validation voice changed the signal, transmitting his voice to his command officer. The voice came in, a bold brassy American sound, but wavering over the miles, in and out of range.

"So, Fisher, you've found it? What's your GPS lat long, we'll do a pickup next week, all right? Got it all locked down there? Mission complete?"

"No, no," stuttered Peter. "Goddammit, we need immediate evac, I think it's gone all wrong. I don't feel safe. We're in danger here. It's not safe – I didn't expect to –"

"Need those GPS coordinates though," came the calm voice over the air. "Don't care if you're under fire, won't help us find you without coordinates."

Peter wildly wondered if the GPS coordinates could shift and move under the stress of whatever Coriolis force was whirling around them and through them. *What if the coordinates moved like a will-o-the-wisp?* What if they were gone, and by the time the military arrived, the solid earth and its precise geo-location had moved hundreds of miles away? What if the location was lost to them, and Peter and Mahmoud with it?

It had been a long journey from Lebanon across the Syrian desert and through to this last well at Ba'al Hadad. He was weary beyond belief. And now the bones of their Bedouin guides were scattered in precise patterns all around them.

He groped desperately through his pack until he found the GPS unit, and he saw that the unit was solid and the numbers on it unmoving. He read off the numbers, and asked for immediate evac again. Mahmoud had stood up now, he was shivering in the strange wind.

"All right," said the blustery man on the radio. "But the weather guys tell me there's some sort of storm coming in, around your location, so we can't send a chopper to you through that. We've got a Stryker brigade starting your way though. Your coordinates are about 800 clicks away. We should be there in about forty-eight hours. Let's say 1600 hours Tuesday, if we come straight through."

Peter felt himself exhausted, his voice hoarse, his pulse pounding in a weird syncopation. He felt as if he were going to have a heart attack. "What the hell are we supposed to –" Peter began. But the military voice interrupted again.

"Put Professor El-Amin on the line."

Mahmoud listened seriously for a long time. He was trembling with the same syncopated rhythm that affected Peter.

When he got off the radio, his face was ashen in the ruddy light of the oncoming storm, and the unreal reddish twilight of the dawn. "Begin negotiations, *min sadiq*, that's what your *Amerikanee* military wants us to do."

"But we're surrounded by dead bodies, and they want us to write mathematical formulas? It's unreasonable to –"

Mahmoud was not listening to him. Mahmoud had scratched the beginnings of a great seal of Solomon, and added the vertices that made it into what Peter knew to be the precise geometric form known as a *Petersen graph*, on the desert ground itself, close beside the great shelf of stone. Peter's own equations and mathematical algorithms, in neatly printed form, were rapidly unrolled by Mahmoud from the case near their side.

Mahmoud swallowed hard and looked at him. "*Min fadlak*, do you really want this thing on the side of the *Amerikanee*?"

“We must,” said Peter, hesitating. “It currently it is on the side of Saddām, he feeds it. I have been instructed to bargain with it. And if it is on anyone’s side...”

“You will choose to feed it? They are insatiable.” Mahmoud turned to him, his eyes wide with terror. “Do you understand what I am saying in these ancient words of Aramic and Arabic? Do you know what your great masters told me to do, what you are offering this... this thing?”

As Mahmoud spoke, the words sounded corrosive, acidic in his throat. Sweat poured off his skin; the tendons stood out on the backs of his hands as he wrote in the dust and the blood. Peter stared at him, seeing a small vein that curled like a snake at his temple throbbing from strain. Mahmoud wrote furiously in the sand, a border line of protective words all the way around them, and an invocation.

Peter nodded his head slowly. He had designed this work, these mathematical systems.

“Then you are cursed,” Mahmoud pointed at him, in the Arabic manner, with three of his fingers. “You should pray to *Allah*, most-merciful, that you do not know. I hope this is truly what your country of the *Amerikanees* wants. For there is no re-negotiation of such promises.”

Peter looked up at the night sky. *Will this all be worth the cost?* That one last thought filled his head as a green aurora rose on the horizon and encompassed the sky, the brightness casting abnormal shadows across their camp as it swept towards the Ba’al Hadad, overwhelming the world in a tidal wave of light.

In his dreams later on that fateful night, Peter was standing on the stone carapace beside the Ba’al Hadad, a luminous and unnatural fog drifting around him. Mahmoud was with him, and this time, he saw a bearded King approaching them over the mirage of a reflecting pool.

Mahmoud spoke, his voice like a dry leaf before a storm. He mouthed the ancient words of greeting:

“Oh great one, blessed are you and blessed be your fertile lands.”

The ancient King held up his hand, turned it, discarded Mahmoud’s statements with a backwards brush of the hand, in the Arabic style. “I do not rise to hear your praise, I come because you call me with a promise of blood and flesh.”

Our own dead bodies, thought Peter desperately, *that’s what he means, not any future deaths, not any more.*

The King glanced at Peter, as if he could read his thoughts. “And I see you wish to make me promises of more. Much much more!” The King clapped his hand formally, as if in command, and in some kind of unnatural joy at the prospect.

“Now,” said the King, bending close to them. And his breath was redolent with corruption, of long unburied bodies. “You have been entrusted to make an offer to me. I am beholden to a self-styled Lord of this Land, the man Ṣaddām who comes of the tribe Hussein al-Takriti. I can leave this Assyrian emperor’s service, as I am not held securely by him, and he has not fulfilled all his promises, but I cannot leave without knowing what you will give me for my honored service. What do you offer me in return?”

“Much more, much more,” said Mahmoud, echoing the King’s words from moments before. And Peter saw a vision of bodies laid in concentric circles all around him in the desert, bodies laid out in dead and dying patterns as far as the eye could see. Cities of the dead, all for the taking. Mahmoud read from his text to the King, but Peter could barely understand the words he said, as his head buzzed and sang in the dream.

“And furthermore,” said Mahmoud. “You will not be bound to a structure, you will instead be free to act upon this land as you will, taking the lives you need to serve us. Our masters also offer many many up as a willing sacrifice: at least one hundred thousand souls. And in the end, the *Amerikane* offer to grant your freedom.”

The King frowned, but Peter saw he was concealing a smile in the deep folds of his beard. “This is well, *min sadiq*, this is well. But as you will not be binding me, how shall we then speak, as we must for me to know your commandments? We cannot always meet in dreams, you know. The visions are not always clear to you with such short lives.”

Mahmoud hesitated, and Peter realized that no one knew enough about such entities to know about the difficulty that a semi-free entity might pose, in terms of basic communication. *How to give battlefield commands to such a creature?* Peter found himself dismayed, and turned to leave the dream.

And then a new vision burst into his sight: he saw a group of orange-suited men, tied in grotesque positions, being brought to know death over and over, but not dead – not yet. Instead, they were brought to the borderline between life and death, and muzzled and incoherent, blind and deaf in all their human senses, forced to exist on that borderline until they absorbed the *djinn*’s reality. They spoke only in the creature’s harsh and guttural tones, their voices and their very souls subsumed in the creature’s corrosive and unnatural tones.

The King pointed, and as Peter watched, the orange-suited slaves faded away.

“These will serve me, these will be my speaking voices,” said the King. “You will destroy these simple tribespeople for me, and through such half-dead creatures, we will have concourse. I agree to these terms. You may honor me now.” And Peter and Mahmoud then both bowed down flat on the ground, to show they understood.

When Peter woke in the morning, he found himself still in the posture of worship, legs and arms and neck cramped from long obeisance before the vision in his dream.

Mahmoud hardly woke at all. He was hot to the touch, and his lips were blistered, as if they had been all night held to a hot kettle. “*Ma `amaltesh hāga ghalat,*” he muttered in his delirium, and Peter laboriously translated: I haven’t done anything wrong.

Mahmoud sang gently then – an Urdu song, a traditional *ghazal*. An ancient poem, nearly forgotten by time. Peter didn’t even know that Mahmoud knew Urdu – it was a language of Pakistan. And the fact that he was reciting poetry unnerved Peter to the core.

What if the poetry was an invocation, just as the many poems that his father had forcibly made him memorize over the years – the haunted elegiac poems by John Donne and George Herbert and Angleton’s favorite, T.S. Eliot. *Was Mahmoud invoking something, or trying to stop something?*

“Mahmoud,” said Peter. “We’ve got to get out of here. Or if we can’t do that, we should complete the ritual. Fulfill our mission and get the hell out of here then.”

Mahmoud did not open his eyes, but he croakingly his voice emerged. “We have completed this thing we were sent to do, *min sadiq*. We have done the task.”

“‘*Ana `āsef,*” muttered Mahmoud. I am sorry.

“I’m sorry too.” Peter fumbled frantically in his backpack. With his eyes closed, he managed to get the radio on and the frequency dialed in.

“‘*Ana mehtāg doctor.*” said Mahmoud. I need a doctor. *Min fadlak*. Please.

Spies & Sorcery 53 “I know, I know,” whispered Peter. “I’m looking, I’m trying.”

Peter opened his eyes and initiated his call sign on the radio in a kind of trance. The voice on the radio was brusque in response, demanding an answer. “What did it say? Did you present the terms of the negotiation? Do we have a deal?”

“The answer is Yes,” Peter said. “I don’t know – I think it said yes to all the terms. Some modifications – some necessary *adjustments* – but yes.”

“It is the end of me,” said Mahmoud. “I am sick to death – ‘*Ana `ayyān.*”

“You’ve got your damn answer, ok? Can you get us immediate evac?” yelled Peter into the microphone. “I don’t care what it takes. Goddammit, I got a guy dying here.”

“We’re close, son,” came the calming voice over the radio. “Close enough to see your position on the horizon. We’ll be there within an hour.”

Mahmoud coughed then, unexpectedly, and then he spoke aloud, desperately. “But you must warn them, the *djinn* will take the first sacrifice which is offered – this is the fee we must pay him upon his emergence. And the men in their Stryker jeeps, they do not know this. You must tell them to seek a *djinn*’s protection, seek some sign of protection.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

Mahmoud stared at him, once last time. *’Ana ’āsef*, he said again. I am sorry. And then the radio connection was gone, the signal fading away. “*Ma`as-salāma*,” said Mahmoud, and his eyes closed. Good-bye, my friend.

Then Peter recalled the words he said when he was standing beside his small Toyota on the desert road. *There is now nothing left to you, my friend, nothing. I hope that is worth enough to save you now.* Peter gently closed the man’s staring eyes. *Blessed be your name.*

A negotiator, who had completed his final bargain. He remembered Mahmoud negotiating for his car, and he hoped that the man had been just as fierce in negotiating a settlement for his family in the event of his death on this mission. *None of us ever think we are going to die.*

He looked down at Mahmoud’s sunken cheeks and unmoving chest, where the blackened stone from the Washington monument was resting uselessly. Even that stone had not been enough to prevent Mahmoud’s mind from cracking under the strain of this invocation. He remembered what Colonel Schwarkopf had told him with such confidence: *we’ll arrange for an enticing offering, one that will be willingly devoured.*

The Stryker battalion arrived at the Ba’al Hadad one hour later. Mahmoud had not moved in all that time, but Peter was very much alive. He opened his eyes to see a man with the stripes of a lieutenant general bending over him, shouting at him in American desert fatigues.

Spies & Sorcery 54 Peter looked around, confused. He was lying on bare desert ground beside the dusty prone form

of Mahmoud El-Amin. Above them was a bright blue sky and a few faint clouds.

The sergeant wordlessly handed him a bottle of water. Peter looked around, still halfway expecting to see the bearded King. Yet he knew that they’d been living in a desert dream.

“We’ve got a whole damn NATO contingent here for you, boy, I hope it’s worth all this.” The lieutenant general pointed behind him, where European flags waved.

Peter turned his head, to see German and French troops standing far back, coming after the Americans. Then he laboriously got to his feet, feeling bone-weary in heart and body. He leaned against the jeep, and took a long drink of the proffered water. There was a tank moving ponderously through the dirt towards the stone, and a brace of rugged-looking Strykers. A quartet of Humvees in close proximity, full of healthy looking soldiers disembarking and securing the location.

He looked around at the men with their guns moving into the haphazard campsite, all around the Ba’al Hadad.

“So where is this thing?” said the sergeant impatiently.

Peter gulped down another drink of water and pointed towards the great black stone shelf. “But there’s danger,” said Peter. “You shouldn’t – ”

Then it was too late.

As the carapace protecting the great spirit of Ba‘al blew apart, and the stones began to fall from the sky like hail, Peter felt himself to be hallucinating, everything colliding in his head: the heat, deprivation and the undeserved death of Mahmoud all overwhelming him at once, numbing him to the sight of terror. A great whispering reverberated through him.

Twenty yards ahead, the soldier standing next to the useless tank with its heavy armaments put his hands up nervously to his brow, as if to brush away a gnat. Peter saw a thin line of blood trickle out of the man’s ear. By the time the soldier got his hands to his hairline, the shuddering rhythm had done something to how the man held his fingers.

Peter watched as the man took a firm grasp on his own head and jaw, and wrenched, snapping his own neck with his bare hands, and the last time that Peter saw him, the man’s eyes were turned round the wrong way staring at him with a terrified knowledge as the body collapsed sideways to the desert floor.

Somewhere in the distance, the howling of jackals or desert wild dogs seemed to jerk together in a simultaneous uncertain cry. With a chill, Peter knew then that the sounds he’d been hearing in the distance were not made by jackals or dogs.

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A susurrating, shuddering rhythm emanated out of the deep desert. It came closer to them every moment. The sound was enthralling, and made it hard to think as it pushed into them, welling up and down like an electrical current, a wave coming up out of deep, deep water.

The iron token Peter held in his coat pocket wouldn’t be enough to protect him.

“Do you have a dollar bill?” Peter said urgently to the sergeant standing next to him.

“What?” the man was staring open-mouthed at the soldiers sinking slowly – some resisting – to the desert floor around them. There was no sound as they were rendered immobile – no screams or moans of agony. They simply stopped moving.

“Do you have a fucking dollar bill?” Peter screamed, and wordlessly, the sergeant reached in his wallet and handed one bill over as a line of blood seeped out of his left ear.

The current rose around them, cycling stronger. And Peter shut his eyes and desperately massaged the shape of the pyramid on the back of the wrinkled dollar bill, feeling the swelling power of the eye that looked unceasing, and he could feel the current slow to ebb around him, a tidal flow moving subtly around a battlement.

He could feel the weak ties of this ancient symbol pulling him through that vast sea of power, slowly towing him back out of the deep waters to safer ground. But he was oh so deep in this mess, and safety was so very far away.

And without even thinking about what he'd heard, Peter knew that the explosions had come in unnatural patterns of scorched concentric circles, one overlapping the other in an endless disharmony of waxing and waning. Circles, branded into the desert forevermore.

There was a great throbbing lurch and the world fell sideways. Peter's eyes shot open in time to see the tank vibrate wildly, sinking into an uneven mirage, before it disintegrated into smaller and smaller parts that hung in the desert air for a moment before blowing outward in an angry and soundless explosion. Behind the tank, Peter could see the great stone carapace of Ba'al Hadad blowing itself to bits as well, every solid iota of it exploding outward into the desert.

The stones went up into the atmosphere; he saw an immense expanding cloud of material silhouetted against the night sky, occluding the stars.

Half the stones came back to earth with a rumbling crash, dirt and rock flying past the remaining Humvee and the prone bodies of the dead men. The stones whistled madly as they flew past him. With a sharp penetrating pain, a small sliver of errant rock sliced into his belly and upward to lodge against his rib. The grinding agony of it came a moment later. He clutched his side and cried in breathless anguish.

The escarpment of stone had vanished as each stone was propelled outward as the thing inside finally, irrevocably, moved. His wound throbbed, and Peter knew that the bait had been taken.

He moved to the side like an automaton. A solitary Humvee was still standing next to him, solid metal, unshaken. With a wondering finger, he touched the small Chinese symbol scratched into its hood by a superstitious soldier. That ancient symbol was the only reason why the vehicle was untouched, why the person inside had survived thus far. Peter saw that he was, in fact, still alive. But unmoving.

In the driver's seat sat a man frozen in terror. *Hendrick*, said a NATO name tag. The young man was shaking, eyes bloodshot and hollow with fear. Without further thought, Peter pushed the trembling Hendrick into the passenger's seat. Peter got into the driver's seat. He turned the key and shifted gears. Then he pulled the wheel to one side to avoid a body lying across the road. His hands were sticky with blood. He glanced down at the spearhead shaped wound in his side.

Peter found himself panting hard. Blood bubbled out of the wound in a slow leak with each of his breaths. The purifying light of that blast had hollowed him out – he felt himself now to be just a moving husk.

Three hundred yards ahead, he could see the observer post, where the rest of the NATO contingent had halted, while the advance team of Strykers went in and never came out. But although he could see the cracked stone shelf where they had been at Ba'al Hadad, the NATO contingent had disappeared already, the unified force already on the move. In the far distance, a plume of dust showed the path that they'd taken towards al-Shad and points beyond. Kuwait was ahead, if they drove for forty hours straight, and were lucky as hell.

Peter shifted gears frantically as the tires snarled and slid in the gritty sand. He never let go of the dollar bill with its talisman, clenching his fingers tightly around it like a claw. His face was streaked with the lines of dried tears. It felt like his face might crack apart along those fractures. The man next to him was whispering, mumbling to himself now, a mad mantra: *I was following orders, orders, orders, just orders.*

Peter tried to ignore the man's insane mutterings. After all, he had seen what had happened to Mahmoud. He felt that would happen to him as well, he saw no way to avoid that fate. In his heart of hearts, Peter knew that he was welded now to this thing in the desert, that he was tied irrevocably to this moment.

Always, Peter saw that great phosphorus light exploding in his head, cauterizing all his memories, everything he'd ever been.