

Shelter

Prologue

North Africa - 1946

The sun beat down from an azure sky, scorching the backs of their necks as they walked across the dusty plain. The captain and the corporal, marching in unison, following the Arab dressed in his white desert robes, his swarthy features masked by a black hood. The soldiers' uniforms clung to their sweating bodies, the boots they wore no match for the hard stony ground. Flies danced at their lips, pecking droplets of perspiration that oozed from their pores. They brushed them away with quick, spiteful motions of their hands.

'Primitive country,' the corporal grumbled.

'They're still living in the middle ages,' the captain agreed. 'I thought they could have at least provided transport.' His legs were aching, his feet blistering inside the boots, but he trudged on, the mountain range growing nearer with every painful step.

Shortly they started to climb. The Arab, with only camel-hide sandals to protect his feet, hopped nimbly from rock to rock, guiding them further up the mountainside. Occasionally he'd stop and wait for them, a gap-toothed smile splitting a face as wrinkled and brown as a walnut.

'How much further?' the captain said; his officer training allowing him to mask his tiredness, though it was there in his eyes.

'Close now,' the Arab said. 'Very close.'

They had chosen him as their guide because of his knowledge of the area and his ability to speak English, a rare gift among this traditional people.

Eventually they saw the cave, a dark hole in the side of the mountain. Another Arab stood outside the entrance. His robes were grubby and ragged, and at his side, hanging from a leather strap, was a curved and wicked looking sword. As they approached he drew the blade from the scabbard and held it aloft.

The captain instinctively reached for the service revolver at his hip, but the corporal stayed his hand. 'It's a greeting, not a threat,' he hissed under his breath.

'You're sure?'

'They mean us no harm. They could have killed us at any time during the trek here. They chose not to.'

'What do you mean?'

The corporal glanced back over his shoulder, signalling with his eyes for the captain to do the same.

Fifty yards behind them were a group of Arabs, keeping pace with them, watching them with hooded eyes.

'I didn't realise...'

'They've been with us since we started out. If they wanted to kill us they would have done so by now.'

They reached the entrance to the cave. The Arab standing guard moved to one side to let them enter, but said something quietly to the guide who nodded urgently and started to make his way back down the mountainside.

'Looks like we're on our own,' the captain said, swallowing hard. Despite the corporal's reassurances, and the relentless heat, a cold sweat was trickling down his back underneath the thin cotton of his tunic.

The entrance to the cave stretched for a hundred yards, tunnelling deep into the mountain. At least it was cooler here, and the ground beneath their feet was smooth rock, not the sandy, stony desert that had been so difficult to traverse. Rush torches hanging from iron brackets set into the walls at regular intervals illuminated the tunnel. The burning rushes gave off an acrid smoke that stung their eyes and irritated their throats, making them cough. The corporal took a swig from a water bottle and handed it to the captain. The captain drank deeply, wiping his lips with the sleeve of his tunic, but the water did nothing to alleviate the dryness of his mouth.

The tunnel finally widened and they found themselves in a cavern, lined with rock, with a ceiling too high to be clearly visible. The guard said something in a tongue they didn't understand, but his message was clear from his gestures. 'Wait here.'

The captain and the corporal exchanged uncertain glances, but they didn't have to wait long. From a gap in the rock at the opposite end of the cavern an old man stepped into view carrying another torch. He bowed a polite welcome and approached them. His robes were clean – impossibly white in this dusty environment – as was the headdress he wore. The folds of material framed a face of wrinkled leather, of great age. The nose was prominent and hooked, the lips below it thin, pressed tightly together in a hard line, framed by a straggly white beard that stretched down to his chest. But the old man's eyes were in great contrast to the rest of his face. Pale blue – the colour of fine Ceylon sapphires – they shone with vitality and intelligence, and something else. The captain stared at him closely. There was something in those sapphire eyes that hinted at deeply hidden secrets, of knowledge as old as time. As the eyes were turned on him he found himself shrinking backwards, away from their gaze.

The old man came closer; the flickering flame of the rush torch he carried lit various features of the darkened cavern. To one side was a slab of stone raised three feet from the floor, supported at each end by two rocks to form a crude table. To the left of the table was a small metal tank, two feet by one, filled to the brim with water, its purpose they could only guess at.

With calm resolve the old man fixed his torch to a bracket on the wall and came to stand before them. 'Thank you for making the journey,' he said in precise but heavily accented English.

'We're still not sure why we're here,' the captain said.

The old man smiled. 'That is about to become clear.' He snapped his fingers.

Two berobed men appeared from the shadows behind him. Each held the arm of a young girl, who sagged between them. No more than seventeen and totally naked, her dark hair awry, a tangled web of black, hanging across her face like a shadow. Her skin glistened in the torchlight and her belly was distended, in the late stages of pregnancy.

The captain and the corporal moved forward as one, both recognising the girl instantly, though it had been months since they had last seen her.

The old man held up his hand. 'No further,' he said. 'Please.'

The soldiers halted. 'What have you done to her?' the captain said, staring at the girl who looked back at him with tearful, frightened eyes. No more than a child, he thought, as a wave of guilt swept over him. He glanced at the corporal whose brow was beading with sweat, his fingers clenching and unclenching, ready to lash out, to fight, to the death if necessary.

The old man spoke calmly. 'I see you recognise the child, yes?'

Both men nodded.

'Then you both know what has happened to her and which of you is responsible.'

The captain let his hand move slowly to his hip, ready to pull the revolver from its holster. This time the corporal did nothing to stop him. 'Just let her go,' the captain said

with forced calmness. 'We're travelling back to England tomorrow. We'll take her back there with us. She should be in hospital, not in some filthy cave.'

The old man considered this for a moment, nodding his head sagely. 'And she would be looked after? She would be treated as an equal in your society? I think not. The girl belongs here, here with us tonight. There is no future for her now. She has sinned and she knows she has to atone for her sin.' He made a quick gesture with his hand and the two men holding the girl dragged her across to the stone table, laying her out on it. The girl was too weak to struggle, and in too much pain as a contraction spasmed through her body.

'Stop this!' the corporal said, taking a step forward, but before he could move again his arms were pinned against his sides by two Arabs from the group that had followed them from town, and now stood in a ragged line behind them. How did they move so silently? The captain was similarly held, but he struggled violently until he realised he was no match for the men.

The old man watched them until they were still, then he snapped an order in Arabic. The two men with the girl moved swiftly. One of them laid his full body weight across the girl's legs, whilst the other lay across her chest, his sinewy hand clamping itself across her mouth. Her teeth bit deep into the bone of his hand, but he maintained his fierce grip.

The old man waited, and then, apparently satisfied that the girl couldn't move, took a curved knife from the waistband of his robe and approached her.

Mercifully his body blocked what came next, but the captain and the corporal were left in no doubt what was happening. Even with the weight of the Arab pressing down on her, her legs thrashed, and her head twisted from side to side. The captain met her eyes as her head turned towards him and he saw a look of indescribable terror and agony written there, as well as a chilling and bitter accusation, as if her eyes were telling him, 'You brought me to this. You did this to me.' He looked away – away from her accusing look, away from the blood that was puddling on the floor at the old man's feet.

The sound of a baby's cry brought his head round again. He looked at the corporal who was swaying on his feet, his face bleached to the colour of ivory.

'It's barbarism,' the corporal whispered under his breath.

The old man heard him and turned, holding a bloodied and crying infant in his arms. 'Barbarism? I assure you gentlemen, natural childbirth would have been much more painful.' Cradling the baby in one arm he turned back to the girl, said something soothing to her and drew the razor-sharp blade of the knife across her throat.

The girl made a small sound, mid-way between a gasp and a sigh, and quietly died.

The old man moved quickly then. Carrying the child across to the water tank he laid the baby gently inside, pushing it down beneath the surface.

The captain and the corporal watched helplessly as the minutes ticked by and the old man held the baby under the water. Finally he released his grip and turned to the other men in the room, a huge grin splitting the ancient, weather-beaten face. 'Verani!' he said exultantly.

There was a murmur of approval from the others but the men holding the captain and the corporal didn't slacken their grip.

The old man said something else to the men in their own tongue and a ripple of laughter eddied around the cavern. 'I said to them you look shocked,' he said simply.

'Butcher!' the captain spat at him. 'First the girl, now the child. Was what she did so very wrong? Why punish her? Why kill the child? We were the one's deserving of punishment, not them.'

The old man raised his eyebrows. 'But the child lives. Look.'

He motioned for them to be brought forward.

They stood in front of the metal tank scarcely believing what they were seeing. The baby was floating, an inch under the surface of the water, but its eyes were open, legs kicking, arms waving, rippling the liquid in the tank.

The corporal shook his head. 'I don't understand.'

The old man put a leathery hand on his arm. 'There is a great deal to understand if you are to care for this child.'

The captain couldn't drag his eyes away from the infant – a boy child he noticed. 'Go on,' he said.

'The child is Verani, like his mother. It breathes the water as we breathe the air. But unlike us it can survive in either, as you will see later.'

'What's Verani?' the captain said.

'All your questions will be answered presently. I will tell you everything you need to know before you take the child back to England with you.'

'But I can't... I'm married.'

The old man smiled knowingly. 'Ah, I see. And your colleague?'

'I'm single,' the corporal said.

'Then it is for you to decide who will act as the child's father. But one of you must. When you enter into a relationship with a Verani it is for life. The girl knew this, and she knew what her fate would be. You will find both pleasure and punishment in this child's life, but you will accept it, without question, without recrimination. What's done is done, and it is within no one's power to rewrite history, or indeed, destiny. Now, I suggest we sit and talk. There is much for you both to learn.'

The Arabs released their hold on them and the captain and the corporal followed the old man to the back of the cave.