

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Hidden Oasis

Paul Sussman

# About the Book

## **Egypt 2153 BC**

Eighty priests set out under cover of darkness into the western desert, taking with them a mysterious object swathed in cloth. Four weeks later, having reached their destination, they calmly slit each other's throats...

## **Albania, 1986**

A plane takes off from a remote airfield, bound for the Sudan. On board a cargo that will forever change the Middle East. Somewhere over the Sahara the plane disappears...

## **The western desert, the present day**

A group of Bedouin discover a mummified corpse half-buried in the dunes. With it are a roll of camera film and a miniature clay obelisk inscribed with a curious hieroglyphic sign...

## **Three unconnected events**

Or so it seems until Freya Hannen arrives in Egypt for the funeral of her sister, a desert explorer who has inexplicably taken her own life.

For Freya it is the start of a terrifying, life-or-death adventure - one that will lead her and Egyptologist Flin Brodie deep into the forbidding wastes of the Sahara. Their goal: one of archaeology's greatest mysteries and the astonishing secret at its heart...

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THE  
HIDDEN  
OASIS



PAUL SUSSMAN

I am blessed to have found the most perfect oasis on earth,  
a place of shelter and warmth and joy unbounded. It is  
called my family: Alicky, Layla, Ezra and Jude.

This book is for them, with love, always.

## THE REAL ZERZURA – AUTHOR’S NOTE

Of all the many myths and legends associated with the Sahara, few if any have captured the imagination in quite the same way as the mysterious lost oasis of Zerzura.

Supposedly a paradise of lush palms and bubbling springs, Zerzura is said to lie somewhere in the burning wastes of the Libyan desert. Many have argued that it is nothing but a fairy tale, a mirage, an El-Dorado of the sands. That has not stopped people looking for it, and much of the early pioneering exploration of the Sahara was carried out by those hoping to track down this curious forgotten watering hole.

The name Zerzura is almost certainly derived from the Arabic *zarzar*, meaning a starling or a small bird. It first crops up in a thirteenth-century manuscript written by Osman el-Nabulsi, the governor of the Fayyum, who talks of an abandoned oasis somewhere in the desert to the southwest of Fayyum. A more detailed and colourful account appears two centuries later in the *Kitab al-Kanuz* – the Book of Hidden Pearls. A medieval treasure-hunter’s guide, the *Kitab* lists some four hundred sites in Egypt where hidden riches can be found, and outlines the various spells and incantations required to ward off the evil spirits who guard those riches. According to the *Kitab*: ‘The city of Zerzura is white like a pigeon, and on the door of it is carved a bird. Take with your hand the key in the beak of the bird, then open the door of the city ... Enter and there you will find great riches, also the king and the queen sleeping in their castle. Do not approach them, but take the treasure.’

The first European to mention the oasis was the English traveller and Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, who in 1835 wrote of hearing about a 'Wadee Zerzoora' a place of palm trees and ruins located somewhere in the Great Sand Sea. A Bedouin had apparently stumbled on it while out looking for a stray camel, although his subsequent attempts to find the oasis again had proved futile (these two elements - the accidental discovery and the inability to relocate the oasis - are common to almost every tale of Zerzura).

The nineteenth century saw growing academic interest both in the Sahara and in the idea of a lost oasis, especially after the German explorer Gerhard Rohlfs' groundbreaking 1874 journey through the Great Sand Sea. However, it wasn't until the early part of the twentieth century that 'Zerzura fever' really took hold.

This was the great age of Saharan exploration, with figures such as Hassanein Bey, Prince Kemal el Din, Ladislaus Almasy, Patrick Clayton and Ralph Alger Bagnold - to name but a few - travelling though and mapping wide tracts of what had until that point been unknown, unrecorded desert. A fascination with Zerzura formed a key element of these exploratory journeys, and while not every expedition set out specifically to find the oasis, the possibility of doing so was never far from people's minds. The subject was debated in depth in newspapers and learned journals, and there was even an informal Zerzura Club comprising those involved in desert exploration (founded in a bar in Wadi Halfa in 1930, the club came together for an annual meeting at London's Royal Geographical Society followed by dinner at the Café Royal).

The work of Bagnold, Almasy et al. revolutionized desert travel, pushing forward the frontiers of geography, geology, archaeology and science. Indeed Bagnold's *The Physics of Blown Sand* - a study of the process of dune formation and

movement - remains a standard text on the subject and was used by NASA when planning its Mars landings.

Their adventures also had a significant bearing on the North African campaigns of the Second World War, with many Zerzura Club regulars putting their expert knowledge to use as members of the British Army's legendary Long Range Desert Group (founded in 1940 by the ubiquitous Bagnold). Almasy alone threw in his lot with the Nazis, something for which his fellow explorers never forgave him.

But through all of this Zerzura itself remained frustratingly elusive. Numerous theories were advanced as to its whereabouts - in 1932 there was huge excitement when an expedition led by Almasy and Clayton made an aerial sighting of two green valleys in the northern part of the Gilf Kebir (later named Wadi Abd el-Malik and Wadi Hamra). While Almasy always maintained that one or both of these wadis were the basis of the whole Zerzura legend, others were not so sure, and the search went on, as it does to this day.

With the Sahara now thoroughly mapped and explored - from the ground, air and space - it is unlikely the search will ever prove successful, but that in no way diminishes Zerzura's mystique. If anything it only adds to it, elevating the oasis from the realms of the earthly into something altogether more potently symbolic.

As the great Ralph Bagnold put it in his book *Libyan Sands*, the power of Zerzura lies less in its actual physical presence than in what it represents - the thrill of exploration, the magic of secret places, the lure of the unknown. In a world in which few corners of the globe remain uncharted, Zerzura gives us hope that there are still adventures to be had and mysteries to be resolved. Seen in that light, Zerzura will always be out there, even when there is nowhere left to explore, for what on one level is simply a lost desert oasis is on another something far more

elemental, something that lies deep within all of us: a yearning for the wonder of discovery.

(Note: If you want to learn more about the whole Zerzura story and those involved in it, Saul Kelly's *The Lost Oasis: The Desert War and the Hunt for Zerzura* is by far the best overview.)





## 2153 BC – EGYPT, THE WESTERN DESERT

THEY HAD BROUGHT a butcher with them out into the far wastes of *deshret*, and it was a cattle-slaughtering knife rather than a ceremonial one that he used to cut their throats.

A savage implement of knapped yellow flint, razor-sharp and as long as a forearm, the butcher went from priest to priest expertly pressing its blade into the soft angle between neck and collarbone. Eyes glazed from the brew of *shepen* and *shedeh* they had drunk to dull the pain, their shaved heads glistening with droplets of sacred water, each man offered prayers to Ra-Atum, imploring Him to bring them safely through the Hall of Two Truths into the Blessed Fields of Iaru. Whereupon the butcher tilted their heads backwards towards the dawn sky and, with a single, firm sweep, slashed their necks from ear to ear.

‘May he walk in the beautiful ways, may he cross the heavenly firmament!’ the remaining priests chanted. ‘May he eat beside Osiris every day!’

Blood spattering across his arms and torso, the butcher lowered each man to the ground and laid him flat before moving to the next priest in line and repeating the process, the row of bodies growing ever longer as he went about his business, blank-faced and brutally efficient.

From a nearby dune top Imti-Khentika, High Priest of Iunu, First Prophet of Ra-Atum, Greatest of Seers, gazed down at this choreographed slaughter. He felt sorrow, of course, at the deaths of so many men he had come to know as brothers. Satisfaction as well, though, for their mission was accomplished and every one of them had known from

the outset that this was how it must end, so that no whisper should ever be spoken abroad of what they had done.

Behind him, in the east, he sensed the first warmth of the sun, Ra-Atum in His aspect as Khepri, bringing light and life to the world. He turned, throwing back his leopardskin hood and opening out his arms, reciting:

*'Oh Atum, who came into being on the hill of creation,  
With a blaze like the Benu Bird in the Benben shrine at  
Iunu!'*

He raised a hand, fingers spread as if to clasp the narrow rim of magenta peeping above the sands on the horizon. Then, turning again, he looked in the opposite direction, westwards, to the rearing wall of cliffs that ran north to south a hundred *khet* distant, like a vast curtain strung across the very edge of the world.

Somewhere at the base of those cliffs, in the thick mesh of shadows that the dawn light had yet to penetrate, was the Divine Gateway: *re-en wesir*, the Mouth of Osiris. It was invisible from where he was standing. And it would have been to an observer positioned right in front of it, for he, Imti, had uttered the spells of closing and concealment and none but those who knew how to look would have been aware of the gateway's presence. So it was that the place of their ancestors, *wehat er-djeru ta*, the oasis at the end of the world, had guarded its secrets across the endless expanse of years, its existence known only to a select few. Not for nothing was it also named *wehat seshtat* - the Hidden Oasis. Their cargo would be secure there. None would find it. It could rest in peace until more settled days should come.

Imti scanned the cliffs, his head nodding as if in approval, then he pulled his gaze back, to the warped spire of rock that burst from the dunes some eight *khet* from the cliff face. It was a striking feature even at this distance,

dominating the surrounding landscape: a curving tower of black stone bowing outwards and upwards to a height of almost twenty *meh-nswt*, like some vast sickle blade ripping through the desert surface or, more appropriately, the foreleg of some gigantic scarab beetle clawing its way up through the sands.

How many travellers, Imti wondered, had passed that lone sentinel without realizing its significance? Few if any, he thought, answering his own question, for these were the empty lands, the dead lands, the domain of Set, where none who valued their lives would ever dream of venturing. Only those who knew of the forgotten places would come this far out into the burning nothingness. Only here would their charge be truly safe, far from the reach of those who would misuse its terrible powers. Yes, thought Imti, despite the horrors of their journey the decision to bring it west had been the right one. Definitely the right one.

Four moons ago now that decision had been taken, by a secret council of the most powerful in the land: Queen Neith; Prince Merenre; the *tjaty* Userkef; General Rehu; and he, Imti-Khentika, Greatest of Seers.

Only the *nisu* himself, Lord of the Two Lands Nefer-ka-re Pepi, had not been present, nor informed of the council's decision. Once Pepi had been a mighty ruler, the equal of Khasekhemwy and Djoser and Khufu. Now in the ninety-third year of his reign, three times the span of a normal man's life, his power and authority had waned. Across the land the nomarchs raised private armies and made war on each other. To the north and the south the Nine Bows harried the borders. For three of the last four years the inundation had not come and the crops had failed.

*Kemet* was disintegrating, and the expectation was that things would only get worse. Son of Ra Pepi might have been, but now, at this time of crisis, others must assume control and make the great choices of state for him. And so their council had spoken: for its own protection, and for the

safety of all men, the *iner-en sedjet* must be taken from Iunu where it was housed and transported back across the fields of sand to the safety of the Hidden Oasis, whence it had originally come.

And to he, Imti-Khentika, High Priest of Iunu, had fallen the responsibility of leading that expedition.

‘Carry him across the winding waterway, ferry him to the eastern side of heaven!’

A renewed swell of chanting rose from below as another throat was cut, another body lowered to the ground. Fifteen lay there now, half their number.

‘Oh Ra, let him come to you!’ called Imti, joining in the chorus. ‘Lead him upon the sacred roads, make him live for ever!’

He watched as the butcher moved to the next man in line, the air echoing with the moist whistle of severed windpipes. Then, as the knife sliced again, Imti turned his eyes away across the desert, recalling the nightmare of the journey they had just undertaken.

Eighty of them had set out, at the start of the *peret* season when the heat was at its least fierce. With their cargo swathed in layers of protective linen and lashed to a wooden sled, they had travelled south, first by boat to Zawty, then overland to the oasis of Kenem. Here they had rested a week before embarking on the last and most daunting stage of their mission – forty *iteru* across the burning, trackless wastes of *deshret* to the great cliffs and the Hidden Oasis.

Seven long weeks that final leg had taken them, the worst Imti had ever known, beyond even his most terrible imaginings. Before they had even reached halfway their pack oxen were all dead and they had had to take up the load themselves, twenty of them at a time yoked together like cattle, their shoulders streaked with blood from the bite of the sled’s tow-ropes, their feet scorched by the fiery sands. Each day their progress had grown slower,

hampered by mountainous dunes and blinding sandstorms, and above all by the heat, which even in that supposedly cool season had seared them from dawn until dusk as though the air itself was on fire.

Thirst, sickness and exhaustion had inexorably reduced their numbers and when their water had run out with still no sign of their destination he had feared their mission was doomed. Still they had trudged on, silent, indomitable, each lost in his private world of torment until on the fortieth day out of Kenem, the gods had rewarded their perseverance with the sight for which they had so long been praying: a hazy band of red across the western horizon marking the line of the great cliffs and the end of their journey.

Even then it was a further three days before they reached the Mouth of Osiris and passed through it into the tree-filled gorge of the oasis, by which point there were only thirty of them still standing. Their burden had been consigned to the temple at the heart of the oasis; they had bathed in the sacred springs; and then, early this morning, the spells of closing and concealment recited, the Two Curses laid, they had trooped back out into the desert and the throat-cutting had begun.

A loud clatter snapped Imti from his reverie. The butcher, a mute, was banging the handle of his knife against a rock to attract his attention.

Twenty-eight bodies lay on the sand beside him, leaving just the two of them still alive. It was the end.

'*Dua-i-nak netjer seni-i,*' said Imti, descending the dune and laying a hand on the butcher's blood-drenched shoulder. 'Thank you, my brother.'

A pause, then:

'You will drink *shepen?*'

The butcher shook his head and handed over his knife, tapping two fingers against his neck to indicate where Imti should cut before turning and kneeling in front of him. The blade was heavier than Imti had imagined, less easy to

control, and it took all his strength to lift it to the butcher's throat and drag it across the flesh. He sliced as deep as he could, an explosion of frothy blood arching outwards across the sand.

'Oh Ra, open the doors of the firmament to him,' he gasped, manhandling the body to the ground. 'Let him come to you and live for ever.'

He arranged the butcher's arms at his sides and, kissing his forehead, trudged back to the top of the dune, feet sinking into the sand almost up to his knees, the knife still clutched in his hand.

The sun was now just a fraction off being fully risen, only the very bottom of its circumference still flattened against the line of the horizon; even at that early hour its heat caused the air to buckle and throb. Imti gazed at it, eyes narrowed as if calculating the length of time it would take to elevate itself completely, then he turned west, towards the distant spire of rock and the dark mass of cliffs beyond. A minute passed, two, three. Suddenly, he lifted his arms to the sky and cried out:

*'Oh Khepri, Oh Khepri,  
Ra-Atum at the dawn,  
Your eye sees all!  
Guard the iner-en sedjet,  
Hold it in your bosom!  
May evildoers be crushed in the jaws of Sobek  
And swallowed into the belly of the serpent Apep,  
So let it rest in peace and silence,  
Behind re-en wesir, in the wehat sehstat!'*

He turned once more towards the sun, threw the leopardskin back over his head and, again struggling with its weight, drew the knife across each of his wrists.

He was an old man - sixty years and more - and his strength swiftly drained away, his eyes dimming, his mind

clouding with a confused procession of images. He saw the girl with the green eyes from the village of his youth (oh how he had loved her!), his old wicker chair atop the Tower of Seshat at Iunu, where he had used to sit at night observing the movement of the stars, the tomb he had had made for himself in the Necropolis of the Seers which would never now hold his body, although his story at least had been left so that his name would live in eternity.

Round and round the images swirled, weaving in and out of each other, merging and splicing and becoming more fragmented until eventually they faded altogether and all that was left was the desert, the sky, the sun and, from somewhere nearby, a soft fluttering of wings.

Initially he thought it must be a vulture come to devour his corpse, but the sound was too delicate for such a large creature. Looking groggily around, he was surprised to see that on the dune top beside him was a tiny yellow-breasted bird, a wagtail, its head cocked to one side. What it was doing out there in the emptiness of the desert he had no idea, but, weak as he was, he smiled, for was it not as a wagtail that the great Benu had first manifested itself, calling in the dawn of creation from its perch atop the mighty Benben stone? Here, surely, at the very end of things, was confirmation that their mission was blessed.

‘May he walk the beautiful ways,’ he murmured. ‘May he cross ...’

He failed to finish the sentence, his legs buckling under him and pitching him face forward onto the sand, dead. The wagtail hopped about a moment, then fluttered up onto his shoulder. Raising its head to the sun, it started to sing.

NOVEMBER 1986 - KUKESI AIRSTRIP, NORTH-  
EASTERN ALBANIA

The Russians were late for the rendezvous which meant that the weather window was gone. Thick racks of cloud streamed eastwards across the Šar mountains, blackening the late afternoon sky. By the time the limousine eventually pulled up at the airfield gates the first snowflakes were drifting down and in the two minutes it took the vehicle to speed out to the waiting Antonov AN-24 and come to a halt beside the boarding steps at the rear of the plane, the flakes had worked themselves up into swirling flurries, powdering the ground with white.

*'Verfluchte Scheiße!'* muttered Reiter, dragging on his cigarette and peering out of the cockpit window at the thickening storm. *'Schwanzlutschende Russen. Cock-sucking Russians.'*

The cockpit door opened behind him, revealing a tall, dark-skinned man in an expensive-looking suit. He had slicked-back hair and smelt strongly of aftershave.

'They're here,' he said, speaking in English. 'Start the engines.'

The door closed again. Reiter took another drag and started flicking switches, his fat, nicotine-stained fingers moving with surprising dexterity across the instrument panels in front of him and above his head.

*'Schwanzlutschende Ägypter,'* he spat. 'Cock-sucking Egyptians.'

To his right, his co-pilot chuckled. He was younger than Reiter, blond, handsome save for the heavy scar that ran across the top of his chin parallel to his bottom lip.

'Spreading sunshine and goodwill wherever you go, Kurt,' he said, twisting in his seat and gazing out of the cockpit's side window. 'How is it possible for one man to contain so much love, I ask myself?'

Reiter grunted but said nothing. Behind them their navigator was leafing through his flight charts.

'You think we'll get off in this?' he asked. 'It's looking pretty bad.'

Reiter shrugged, fingers still dancing over the instrument panels.

'Depends how long Omar Sharif spends fannyng around out there. Another fifteen minutes and the runway's going to be buried.'

'Then?'

'Then we get to spend the night in this godforsaken shithole. So let's just hope Omar gets his skates on.'

He hit the starter buttons. With a sputter and a whine, the twin Ivchenko turboprops blasted into life, the propellers slicing at the snow-filled air, the fuselage trembling around them.

'Time, Rudi?'

The co-pilot glanced at his watch, a steel Rolex Explorer that had seen better days.

'Coming up to five.'

'They've got till ten-past and then I'm shutting down again,' said Reiter, leaning sideways and drilling his cigarette out into an ashtray on the floor. 'Ten-past and that's it.'

The co-pilot twisted round further and craned his neck, watching as the man in the suit descended the boarding steps, a chunky leather holdall clutched in his hand. Another man followed him down, this one wrapped in a heavy coat and scarf. The limousine's rear door swung open to meet them and the man in the suit disappeared inside, his companion taking up position at the bottom of the steps.

'So what's the deal here, Kurt?' asked the co-pilot, still gazing out. 'Drugs? Guns?'

Reiter lit another cigarette and rolled his head, vertebrae clicking.

'Don't know, don't care. We pick up Omar in Munich, fly him here, he does whatever he's got to do and then we take him on down to Khartoum. No questions asked.'

‘The last no-questions-asked job I did some bastard tried to cut me a new mouth,’ muttered the co-pilot, reaching up and touching the scar underneath his bottom lip. ‘I just hope they’re paying us well.’

He threw a glance over his shoulder then returned his gaze to the window, watching as the limousine’s bonnet slowly disappeared beneath a thin carapace of snow. Five minutes passed, the car door swung open again and the suited man re-emerged. His holdall was gone. In its place he was now clutching a large metal case, heavy to judge by the way he was struggling with it. He handed it to his companion, another case was passed out to him and the two of them trudged up the boarding steps into the plane. A moment later they came back out and collected two more cases before once again clambering back up into the Antonov. The co-pilot caught a momentary glimpse of someone inside the limousine, swathed in what looked like an ankle-length black leather coat, before a hand reached out, slammed the door and the vehicle sped off.

‘OK, they’re done,’ he said, turning away. ‘Get us closed up, Jerry.’

While the navigator headed back into the cabin to retract the steps and secure the door, the two pilots donned headsets and ran through their final checks. Behind them the suited Egyptian loomed in the cockpit doorway, his head and shoulders dusted with snow.

‘The weather will not prevent us taking off.’

It was phrased more as a statement than a question.

‘You let me be the judge of that,’ growled Reiter, cigarette clamped between his teeth. ‘If it’s blowing too hard on the runway we’re shutting down and sitting it out.’

‘Mr Girgis is expecting us in Khartoum tonight,’ said the Egyptian. ‘We will take off as planned.’

‘If your Russian friends hadn’t been late it wouldn’t be a fucking issue,’ snapped Reiter. ‘Now get back to your seat. Jerry, get them strapped in!’

Reaching down he released the brakes, eased the mixture control forward, then the throttle levers. The engine's pitch rose to a roar as the revs shot up. The plane started to move.

'The weather must not prevent us taking off!' came the Egyptian's voice from behind them in the cabin. 'Mr Girgis expects us in Khartoum tonight!'

'Kiss my arse, rag-head,' muttered Reiter, taxiing the plane out to the end of the cinder runway and turning. The navigator came back in, closed the cockpit door and sat down, buckling his seatbelt.

'What do you think?' he asked, nodding out of the window at the worsening blizzard. Reiter just pulled back on the throttle, gazed a moment at the spiralling snow, then, with a muttered 'Fuck it!' pushed the throttle forward again, grasping the control column with his other hand.

'Grab your balls, boys,' he said. 'This is going to be bumpy.'

The plane rapidly picked up speed, bumping and swerving on the uneven cinder surface. Reiter's feet wrestled with the rudder pedals as he struggled to counter the crosswinds now whipping across the airfield. At 80 knots the Antonov's nose came up, only to drop again and with the end of the runway looming ever nearer the navigator yelled at Reiter to abort. The pilot ignored him, holding the plane steady, pushing the speed up to 90 knots, then 100, then 110. At the last minute, as the speed indicator hit 115 and the end of the runway disappeared beneath them, he yanked the control column back towards his chest. The plane's nose lurched upwards, its wheels bumping across grass before rising sluggishly into the air.

'Jesus Christ,' coughed the navigator. 'You mad fucking ...'

Reiter chuckled and lit another cigarette, taking them up through the clouds and into the clear sky above.

'Easy,' he said.

They refuelled in Benghazi on the North African coast before setting a course south-east across the Sahara, cruising at 5,000 metres, the plane on auto-pilot, the desert below glowing a dull silver in the moonlight as though it had been cast out of pewter. Ninety minutes into the flight they shared a thermos of tepid coffee and some sandwiches. An hour after that they cracked open a bottle of vodka, the navigator easing the cockpit door ajar and throwing a glance into the cabin behind.

'Asleep,' he said, clicking the door closed again. 'Both of them. Spark out.'

'Maybe we should take a look in one of the cases,' said the co-pilot, swigging from the vodka bottle and handing it across to Reiter. 'While they're both out of it.'

'Not a good idea,' said the navigator. 'They're packing. Or at least Omar is. Saw it under his jacket when I was strapping him in. A Glock, I think, or a Browning. Didn't get a proper look.'

The co-pilot shook his head.

'I've got a bad feeling about this. Have had from the start. A very bad feeling.'

He stood, stretched his legs and, stepping to the back of the cockpit, removed a canvas shoulder bag from the wall locker. He sat down again and started rummaging inside it.

'You want to get one of my cock?' asked Reiter as the co-pilot pulled out a camera.

'Sorry, Kurt, haven't got a big enough lens.'

The navigator was leaning forward.

'Leica?' he asked.

The co-pilot nodded.

'M6. Bought it a couple of weeks ago. Thought I'd get some shots of Khartoum. Never been there before.'

Reiter gave a disparaging snort and, taking a long gulp, passed the vodka bottle over his shoulder to the navigator. The co-pilot fiddled with the camera, turning it over in his hands.

'Hey, you know that bird I've been knocking off?'

'What, the one with the big arse?' said the navigator.

The co-pilot smirked and waggled the camera.

'Got some pics of her before we left.'

Reiter turned, interested suddenly.

'What sort of pics?'

'Kind of artistic,' said the co-pilot.

'What does that mean?'

'You know, Kurt, artistic.'

'I don't fucking know.'

'Artistic. Tasteful. Stockings, suspenders, legs round her neck, banana up her ...'

Reiter's eyes widened, his mouth shaping itself into a lustful pucker. Behind them the navigator grinned and started humming the tune to Queen's 'Fat-Bottomed Girls'. The co-pilot joined in, then Reiter as well, the three of them breaking into song as one, belting out the chorus, slapping time on the armrests of their seats. They sang it once, twice, and were just starting on a third round when Reiter suddenly fell silent, leaning forward and peering out of the cockpit window. The co-pilot and navigator sang on for another couple of lines until their voices too trailed off as they realized Reiter was no longer with them.

'What?' asked the navigator.

Reiter just nodded ahead, to where what looked like a vast mountain had suddenly loomed in the distance, directly across their flight path - a dense, bulging mass of shadow rearing from the desert floor high into the sky and stretching from horizon to horizon. Although it was hard to be sure, it seemed to be moving, drifting towards them.

'What is that?' asked the navigator. 'Mist?'

Reiter said nothing, just watched through narrowed eyes as the darkness came steadily closer.

'Sandstorm,' he said eventually.

'God Almighty,' whistled the co-pilot. 'Look at it.'

Reiter grasped the handles of the control column and started to ease it back.

'We need to get higher.'

They climbed to 5,500 metres, then 6,000 as the storm advanced inexorably in their direction, devouring the ground, blotting it out.

'Fuck, it's moving fast,' said Reiter.

They climbed higher, right up to their service ceiling, almost 7,000 metres. The wall of shadow was now close enough for them to make out its contours, great folds and billows of dust creasing around and into each other, tumbling silently across the landscape. The plane started to bump and tremble.

'I don't think we're going to get above it,' said the co-pilot.

The bumping became more pronounced, a faint hissing sound percolating into the cockpit as grains of sand and other debris started to impact on the windows and fuselage.

'If any of that gets in the engines ...'

'... we're screwed,' muttered Reiter, finishing the co-pilot's sentence. 'We'll have to backtrack and try to go round it.'

The storm seemed to be gathering speed. As if aware of their intentions and anxious to catch them before they could turn, its face surged forward like a tidal wave, eating up the intervening distance. Reiter started to bank the plane to port, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead.

'If we can just get her round we should be—'

He was cut short by a loud bang, outside, to starboard. The plane yawed sharply in the same direction and started to roll, its nose dropping, the master caution indicators bursting into life like the lights on a Christmas tree.

'Oh Christ!' cried the navigator. 'Oh Jesus Christ!'

Reiter was fighting to stabilize the aircraft as their dive steepened, the cockpit turning almost 40 degrees on its

side. Equipment tumbled out of the locker behind them, the discarded vodka bottle span across the floor and smashed against the starboard bulkhead.

'Fire starboard engine,' yelled the co-pilot, throwing a backward glance out of the window. 'A lot of fucking fire, Kurt!'

'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' hissed Reiter.

'Fuel pressure dropping. Oil pressure dropping. Altitude six thousand five hundred and dropping. Turn-and-slip - Christ, it's all over the place!'

'Shut it down and hit the fire bottle!' shouted Reiter. 'Jerry, I need to know where we are. Fast.'

While the navigator scrambled to locate their position and the co-pilot furiously flicked switches, Reiter continued to battle the controls, the plane losing height all the time, spiralling downward in a series of broad circles, the storm coming ever closer, looming in and out of the cockpit window like a towering cliff face.

'Six thousand metres,' cried the co-pilot. 'Five thousand seven hundred ... six hundred ... five hundred. You've got to get the nose up and turn us, Kurt!'

'Tell me something I don't already fucking know!' There was an edge of panic in his voice. 'Jerry?'

'Twenty-three degrees 30 minutes north,' called the navigator. 'Twenty-five degrees 18 minutes east.'

'Where's the nearest airfield?'

'What the hell are you talking about? We're in the middle of the fucking Sahara! There aren't any airfields! Dakhla's three hundred and fifty kilometres, Kufra's—'

The cabin door flew open and the suited Egyptian staggered into the cockpit, grasping at the navigator's seat to steady himself as the plane bucked and rolled.

'What is happening?' he cried. 'Tell me what is happening!'

'Christ Al-fucking-mighty!' roared Reiter. 'Get back to your seat, you mad—'

He got no further because at that moment the storm lunged forward and enveloped them, flinging the Antonov up and then down as though it were made of balsa. The Egyptian was pitched face forward against the armrest of Reiter's seat, slicing his head open; the port engine sputtered, coughed and died.

'Get out a Mayday,' cried Reiter.

'No!' coughed the Egyptian, pawing at his shredded scalp. 'Radio silence. We agreed there would be—'

'Call it, Rudi!'

The co-pilot had already flicked on the radio.

'Mayday, Mayday. Victor Papa Charlie Mike Tango four seven three. Mayday, Mayday. Both engines out. Repeat, both engines out. Position ...'

The navigator repeated their GPS co-ordinates and the co-pilot relayed them into his microphone, sending the message over and over as Reiter wrestled with the controls. With no power and the storm buffeting them from all sides it was a hopeless battle and they continued to plummet, the altimeter's needle spinning relentlessly anticlockwise, its gauge clicking downwards past 5,000 metres, then 4,000, 3,000, 2,000. Outside the howling of the wind grew louder, the turbulence ever more violent as they plunged into the heart of the maelstrom.

'We're going down!' cried Reiter as they dipped below 1,500 metres. 'Get Omar secure.'

The navigator dropped the folding chair on the back of the co-pilot's seat and heaved their blood-soaked passenger onto it, strapping him in before lurching back to his own seat.

'*Estana!*' the Egyptian called weakly to his companion in the cabin. '*Ehna hanoaa! Echahd!*'

They were now under 1,000 metres. Reiter dropped the landing flaps and activated the wing spoilers in a desperate bid to reduce their speed.

'Undercarriage?' shouted the co-pilot, his voice all but drowned out by the raging of the wind and the clatter of debris against the plane's fuselage.

'Can't risk it!' yelled Reiter. 'If it's rocky down there it'll flip us over.'

'Chances?'

'Somewhere south of nil.'

He continued to pull on the control column, a chant of '*Allah-u-Akhbar!*' echoing from the cabin behind, the co-pilot and navigator watching in horrified fascination as the altimeter whirred its way downwards through the last few hundred metres.

'If we get out of this you make sure you share those photos, Rudi!' cried Reiter at the very last moment. 'You hear! I want to see that woman's tits and arse!'

The altimeter hit zero. Reiter gave the control yoke a final yank, the nose by some miracle responding and coming up so that although they hit the ground at almost 400 km/hour, they at least did so level. There was a ferocious, bone-shattering thud: the impact ripped the Egyptian out of his seat and smashed him first into the ceiling of the cockpit and then against its rear wall, his neck snapping like a twig. They bounced, came down again, the cockpit lights cut out and the port window exploded inwards, shearing off half of Reiter's face like a scalpel. His hysterical screams were all but obliterated by the raging of the storm, a suffocating cloud of sand and debris pouring in through the opening where the window had been.

For 1,000 metres they careered across flat terrain, bucking and jolting but just about keeping a straight line. Then the plane's nose glanced against some unseen obstruction and they went into a spin, the 14-tonne Antonov whirling around like a leaf in a breeze. A fire extinguisher tore itself from its holder and cannoned into the navigator's ribs, shattering them as though they were made of china; the door of the wall locker flew from its

hinges and crunched into the back of Reiter's head, pulping it. Round and round they went, all sense of speed and direction lost in the choking murk of the cockpit, everything kaleidoscoping into a single chaotic blur. After what seemed like an age but must have been only seconds, they started to slow, the plane's revolutions slackening as the desert's surface grasped at the underside and finally brought the plane to a halt, leaning backwards at a precarious angle as though on the edge of a sharp slope, the nose pointing upwards.

For a moment everything was still, the sandstorm continuing to hammer against the fuselage and windows, the acrid stench of super-heated metal suffusing the cockpit; then, groggily, the co-pilot shifted in his seat.

'Kurt?' he called. 'Jerry?'

No response. He reached out, fingers touching something warm and wet, then started to unbuckle himself. As he did so he felt the plane tilt. He stopped, waited, then continued to fumble, throwing off his harness and levering himself out of his seat. Another tilt, the plane's nose seesawing up and then down. The co-pilot froze, trying to sense what was happening, peering into the blackness. Again the plane pivoted before, with a groan and a creak, its nose started to rise and this time kept on going, rearing almost vertical as the Antonov started to slide backwards. It snagged on something, stopped, started sliding again and then it was plummeting tail-first through open space. The sandstorm disappeared and the windows suddenly cleared to reveal tangled glimpses of shadowy rock walls to either side, as though they were falling into a gorge of some sort. The plane bounced and cartwheeled downwards until with a deafening crunch it slammed belly-first into a dense mass of trees. For several moments the only sounds were the crack and hiss of tortured metal. Then, gradually, other noises started to fade in: a rustle of leaves, a distant tinkle

of water and, soft at first but growing steadily louder until it filled the night, the startled twittering of birds.

'Kurt?' groaned a voice from inside the wreckage.  
'Jerry?'

## WASHINGTON. THE PENTAGON BUILDING. THE SAME EVENING

'Thank you all for coming. I apologize for bringing you here at such short notice, but something has ... cropped up.'

The speaker drew heavily on his cigarette, wafting a hand to dispel the smoke and gazing intently at the seven men and one woman gathered round the table in front of him. The suite was windowless, sparsely furnished, nondescript, the same as hundreds of other offices within the cramped catacomb of the Pentagon, its sole distinguishing feature a large map of Africa and the Middle East covering most of one wall. That and the fact that the only lighting came from a battered Anglepoise lamp sitting on the floor at the foot of the map, so that while the map itself was illuminated everything else in the room, including those in it, was sunk in deep shadow.

'Forty minutes ago,' the speaker continued, his voice low, throaty, 'one of our stations picked up a radio message from over the Sahara.'

He reached into his pocket and produced a hand-held laser pointer, directing its eye towards the map. A jerky red dot appeared in the middle of the Mediterranean.

'It was sent from about here.'

The dot slid down the map, coming to rest in the southwest corner of Egypt, close to the intersection of the borders with Libya and Sudan, over the words *Hadabat al Jilf al Kabir* (The Gilf Kebir Plateau).

'The message came from a plane. A Cayman-registered Antonov, call sign VP-CMT 473.'