

The Maze

Panos Karnezis

CHAPTER 1

Brigadier Nestor rubbed his eyes and sat up in his cot. His eyes were faint and colourless like paper watermarks, as if his eternal habit of rubbing them with the hard knuckles of his forefingers had slowly eroded their sheen. He yawned and unlocked the trunk with the keys that hung from his neck. The armoured trunk was packed with pressed and neatly folded clothes, some of which he had not yet worn on this tour of duty: a parade uniform with its medals and ribbons, a black one for evening functions with satin lapels and gold epaulets, a short riding tunic with coloured lanyards. He rummaged impatiently through the trunk; under his patent-leather boots with the silver spurs he found the bundle with everything his wife had sent him since the beginning of the war: Christmas and Easter cards, newspaper clippings, a postcard of a spa by the sea, a child's crayon drawing. He pulled off the rubber band that held the letters together and let them drop to the corrugated floor.

It was hot and dark in the back of the lorry. A thick canvas stretched over the roof and the sides, letting no light in or heat out. Brigadier Nestor felt nauseous and his throat was dry, but he craved neither a drink nor fresh air. He stood up and struggled to keep his balance while the moving lorry rocked from side to side. Stepping over his once precious correspondence, he leaned over the stove, lifted the lid of the steaming kettle with a pair of tongs, and removed the glass hypodermic syringe. He drew from a little vial, rolled up his sleeve, fastened the rubber band tight above his elbow, and finally injected the morphia.

The lorry continued its journey, moving in and out of the potholes in the dirt track; blasts of hot sand exploded on the tarpaulin like enemy potshots. The exhaust backfired and the smell of petrol entered Brigadier Nestor's nostrils, causing an unwelcome awakening of his senses. The sun cast the shadow of the vehicle on the saltpetre; it resembled a crawling scarab. There were dunes of soft, gold sand all round, and on the side of the track were the bleached bones of birds and camels. Feeling the morphia in his blood, the brigadier rolled his eyes and smiled like a child. Soon the drug had erased both his tiredness and his thirst. The suspension creaked and a tin cup rolled across the floor. The wind carried over the padre's voice.

'... When the poor and the needy seek water and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.'

For a moment the brigadier forgot the horror and felt as if adrift in a tranquil sea, the sea that was their destination – albeit not the ultimate one; that was the motherland. But if they reached the coast – anywhere along the coast – they would have a good chance of salvation. His eyes watered from the petrol fumes. Only now did he

register the explosions of the battered exhaust and his intoxicated reason misinterpreted them. Were they being fired at? he wondered, but with little alarm, as if an ambush were not a threat but a mere inconvenience. While the lorry was driving round a bend on the road, a little light came through the crack of the hatch and the dust in the carriage sparkled. Outside, the vultures circled the walking soldiers and croaked impatiently.

'I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.'

The brigade had been on the move since dawn. What time was it? Brigadier Nestor only knew it was daytime, it was hot and they were still in the desert. How long ago had they entered this maze? Had he been sober he could have answered, but his memory had now been swallowed by the quicksand of the morphia. On the horizon whirlwinds of dust shot upwards. The old officer coughed; his eyes grew heavy and he dropped back on his cot.

'I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together.'

The reciting voice became distant and the brigadier sank slowly into a dreamless sleep.

In August the waiting had been over. That morning the sun had risen red and ominous to inaugurate the fateful day. Under the sun the line of the horizon had appeared gradually, like a line made of sympathetic ink, and soon the rest of the Anatolian steppe was revealed, an endless plateau interrupted by a few hills, shrubs of myrtle and ancient ruins. Then it began. The artillery barrage, thundering like an untimely storm, had signalled the beginning of the enemy offensive. The guns had pounded the trenches long enough for the soldiers to think that the gunners were set on levelling the hills and opening new gorges and caves in the prehistoric landscape. The batteries had ceased fire and shortly, from the pall of smoke, the infantry had emerged. There were ten divisions at the front and the soldiers came in waves behind their bayonets, panting. They ran across the barren plain, up the fortified hills, and neither the barbed wire nor the machine guns could stop them. The dead piled up in the gullies that ran down the hills, but more men came until one after another every stronghold was overwhelmed.

Brigadier Nestor had been in bed when the offensive had begun. The evening before he had attended a dance at a nearby town that had continued well into the night. It had been a pleasant soirée. He had welcomed the invitation, presented to him by the president of the local social club, for the long uneventfulness on the front had also caused a stalemate in his disposition. For sure, he had strong views about the situation and had made these known to his superiors: namely, that the present inactivity was not prolonging peace but increasing the likelihood of a great disaster. But for some time his frustration, like that of many other officers and soldiers, had given way to a fatalistic apathy. Accordingly, at the dance, when ambushed by a cheerful group of educated ladies and prosperous merchants, he had refused to discuss the status quo, saying only that in his opinion the front line was the sharp

edge of a knife stuck into the enemy's side, and those who believed that there could be peace without it being carefully removed were deluding themselves. That evening he had devoted most of his energies to the plundering of the inexhaustible buffet, and only after midnight, when the brass band had played *Rosen aus dem Süden*, had he allowed himself to yield to the pleas of a luminous young beauty and had made the brave, for a man of his age, decision to dance in the rapid Viennese style. That waltz was still ringing in his ears when the enemy bombardment began at dawn.

It was all over in two days. On the barren landscape now lay decomposing bodies, abandoned garrisons and telegraph poles with cut wires. What remained of the army split into lawless units that ignored their leaders' orders and fled for their lives. The war in Asia Minor had been lost. In the whirlpool of the defeat Brigadier Nestor's decimated unit, less than a thousand men, had preserved its discipline and was trying to find a way out of the maze and to reach the sea. They had to avoid contact with the enemy; they had been travelling for days, changing direction every time they suspected an ambush ahead, but there had been no sight of the coast as yet. Furthermore, communication with General Headquarters had been lost, and many suspected that the rest of the Expeditionary Corps had by now evacuated the peninsula.

In any case, Brigadier Nestor refused to raise the white flag.

The first thing the brigadier did when he awoke was to hide the syringe under his cot. It was late afternoon and the column had halted. There was the snorting of horses outside and the occasional clop of a shod hoof on stone. Brigadier Nestor sat back and crossed his hands over his belly. He felt contented, even though he knew well that his emotions were only due to the generosity of the morphia – he had grown to accept its effect without shame. After a while he sat up and with a bayonet attempted to open a sealed cigar box. He was still struggling when a younger officer climbed into the lorry and gave a casual salute. His uniform was caked with dust, his kepi was missing its cockade and a towel was tucked into its back to cover the nape of his neck. Brigadier Nestor looked fleetingly at his subordinate – it was enough for his eyes to register their disapproval of the man's beard.

'It's you, Porfirio – I mistook you for Don Quixote.'

His Chief of Staff wiped his face on his cuff. Through the open hatch the sand of the desert blew in, settling on the blankets, the maps, the smoking coffee pot on the stove. With his face clean the major looked much younger.

'Is it time?' the brigadier asked.

The radio-telegraph was in a corner, next to the old bicycle that drove its magneto. Without replying, Major Porfirio sat on the seat and began to pedal with a burdensome sense of duty. He looked like someone arriving for a long but uncomplicated shift – a night porter or a watchman. The rear wheel, kept an inch above the floor, was set in motion with a hissing sound. There was a certain desperation in the task, which was supplemented perfectly by the assortment of dusty utensils, the small stove, the table with the yellowed maps.

For the next hour Brigadier Nestor sent messages and waited for a reply, but the only thing he heard in the headphones was electromagnetic noise. He gave up with a shrug of his shoulders; his Chief of Staff wiped his forehead and stopped pedalling. They had failed again. For the past week they had been trying to contact General Headquarters, but the only replies they received were a message from the enemy calling on them to surrender or face total annihilation and a prayer to St Varvara keyed by the operator of the wireless on board a Greek cargo ship nearing Suez. The brigadier sighed and poured two coffees. As soon as he took a sip he grimaced.

‘Unsweetened coffee could have been the punishment of Sisyphus,’ he said.

He had awakened that morning to discover that the tin with the sugar had disappeared. At first he had suspected his orderly, but according to several witnesses the boy had spent the night in the infirmary, recovering from a snakebite. Brigadier Nestor threw his hands in the air: Major Porfirio raised his eyebrows. The mystery had caused the old man a disproportionate glumness – one might have thought the fate of the sugar concerned him more than that of the brigade itself.

‘A breakdown of discipline. If only I knew who had stolen it.’

He set his cup on the floor and took the cigar box in his hands again. On its lid was the picture of an African wearing a fez, with smoke coming out of his ears. The brigadier tried to break the seal again with the bayonet. It slipped and cut his finger, the box hit the metal floor with a dull sound and the old officer set to sucking his finger. At his feet the caricature of the African stared at him. Brigadier Nestor felt his disposition balance on a tightrope. The major lifted up the box, took a switchblade from his pocket and worked its tip into the groove of the seal. When at last he heard the metal break, the brigadier let out a sigh of relief and welcomed the scent of tobacco. For a while the two men smoked.

‘I miss reading the papers,’ said the brigadier.

‘There would be nothing to read. When the situation took a turn for the worse, they started printing the old stories with the names and dates changed.’

Brigadier Nestor agreed that the heavy censorship had affected the quality of the news. But any newspaper would still be better than none at all. He shoved his hand under his cot and revealed a large leather tome. The spine read *Lexicon of Greek and Roman Myths* in fading letters. In its thick creased pages several lines had been underlined by a passionate hand. He closed the book and tapped the burgundy cover with his finger.

‘A most pleasurable read. The padre is incensed that I know more of this by heart than the Bible.’

The major glanced at the heavy book. Behind the desk the rusty bicycle stood like a relic of old, carefree times. At that moment the experience of pleasure felt to the officer like a very distant memory. He put out his cigar, hid it in his pocket and

spread a map over his knees. He ran his hand across the gridlines, then stopped and rubbed the nape of his neck.

‘Well,’ he announced. ‘We’re lost.’

His commanding officer received the news without surprise.

‘There is always the possibility of divine intervention.’

A bird’s cry came from afar, sounding like a curse. Feeling queasy from the heat, Major Porfirio put down his cup.

‘I didn’t like this campaign from the start,’ he said.

The brigadier closed his eyes.

‘Discipline is needed now more than ever, major.’

The major let his eyes wander from the kettle on the stove to the envelopes strewn across the floor, to the leather belt with the holstered revolver that hung from a crossbar of the roof of the lorry. Brigadier Nestor sneezed.

‘The dust is giving me an allergy . . . Naturally, I understand your disappointment – under the circumstances.’ He took a deep breath and summoned the last reserves of his optimism. ‘But rest assured this story is not over. Now we are down – but.’

The major went back to studying the map.

‘Not to mention our Christian brothers here in Anatolia,’ continued his superior. ‘They shall need our help again.’

The brigadier tapped his boot on the floor. The morphia had unearthed a rare eloquence in him – he felt as if he were not sitting on his cot but standing on a marble plinth. He looked a few inches above the major’s head, to the past.

‘Once there was an empire, major.’

The younger officer arched his eyebrows. ‘An empire?’

‘The Byzantine Empire.’

‘A long time ago, brigadier.’

Brigadier Nestor raised his forefinger.

‘History is what happens over centuries – not yesterday.’

He gulped his coffee. The sun was setting and he asked for his greatcoat. Through the open hatch he watched a scudding cloud with a castaway's expression. He took the cigar out of his pocket, lit it and savoured the mentholated smoke.

'This cigar is not bad. But the coffee tastes like my mother-in-law.'

He handed over his cup and cracked the joints of his fingers. The drug had afforded him its brief windfall and was now receding – if only he could maintain that feeling a little longer . . . Brigadier Nestor tried to recall the time he had no need of the services of chemistry, but it was like trying to remember how it had once felt being a boy. His subordinate poured the remains of both cups back in the pot. 'Any orders?' he asked.

The miracle of the morphia was evaporating. Brigadier Nestor wrapped himself in his coat and waved the major away. 'No. Dismiss.' When Major Porfirio turned to leave the old man spoke again. 'One moment.' He gave his subordinate a tender look – there was a hint of honest concern in what he said next.

'Don't forget, Porfirio. In the aftermath of defeat the firing squad works overtime.'

The old officer waited until the footsteps had faded away, then buttoned up the flaps of the tarpaulin and found the syringe he had hidden under his cot. A whistle blew outside, and the order to start again travelled down the column. For a quiet moment Brigadier Nestor held the syringe to the light and smiled at it with disaffection.

'A little more,' requested Father Simeon shyly, holding his mess tin with both hands. His left eye looked straight at the cook, while the other was trained somewhere to the right and above the man's head.

That eye was made of glass – Father Simeon had lost the one given to him by God during a barrage of artillery fire in the first year of the expedition when, despite the repeated warnings of the soldiers, he had rushed to administer the last rites to a cavalryman lying in the field. A piece of shrapnel had hit the ground near them, penetrated the belly of the man's dead horse and caught the padre in the face. For several days Father Simeon had worn an eyepatch with some embarrassment, until the brigade had liberated the next town. There the padre had promptly bought one of the eyes of a stuffed jackal from a local taxidermist.

Father Simeon held out the tin.

'The day of saints Michael and Gabriel is coming up, friend.'

The cook looked at him.

'The patron saints of soldiers,' the padre explained. 'I'll put in a good word for you.'

He was in his fifties, but his skin was resisting the attacks of age with success. Despite the eye wound and the clerical beard, his face was still handsome and lively. For many years he had been the pastor of a small congregation in a village that

offered few opportunities for sin. Indeed, boredom was one reason he had volunteered for the campaign despite his age – the other was his sense of not having fulfilled the requirements of his vocation. As a young priest he had toyed with the idea of joining the Orthodox Mission in Africa, but then he had chanced across an illustrated novel which showed an explorer in a boiling cauldron and natives dancing all round him. All at once his ear had turned deaf to his divine calling, a decision that had left him with an eternal sense of guilt.

The cook puffed with impatience. 'Not a drop, Father,' he said and shooed away the flies with his ladle. 'The mechanic needs it for the lorries.'

The padre raised his eye to the sky.

'Lord, forgive him. He is betraying the souls of his comrades for some pistons.'

He refused to go away. A buzzard landed at the nearby rubbish heap and began to walk towards the rotting matter cautiously, keeping an eye on the man with the ladle. Other birds big and small plunged from the sky into the remnants of the afternoon mess, hesitantly at first, more bravely after a while. Father Simeon counted the months that had passed since it had rained: under his feet the sand felt hard and dry. Suddenly he tried to imagine the life of the old Christian hermits, and the old sense of worthlessness came over him. While he struggled with it, the cook picked up a wire brush and started cleaning the stove. Father Simeon rocked on his feet from side to side.

'How about that oil, friend?' he asked again.

The cook continued his work.

'Against orders.'

'When we get home I will personally ask the bishop to reward you for your piety.'

The cook opened the oven door and put his head inside.

'Not even your patron saints know whether we'll make it.'

Father Simeon did not contradict him. Instead, his eye fell on the cook's back and he frowned: the man's trousers were ripped at the seam. The padre murmured his displeasure.

'What now, Father?' the cook asked.

'Wider than the Straits of the Dardanelles.'

Without removing his head from the oven, the cook felt the seat of his trousers, grunted indifferently and resumed his work. Father Simeon walked round to the other side of the stove in order to avoid the spectacle.

'Five,' he finally murmured.

The cook took his head out of the oven and grinned.

'Ten.'

'Seven, sinner.'

The cook agreed. He wiped his hands on his apron, picked up the burned pan and filled the padre's tin to the brim. Father Simeon looked searchingly around: on the rubbish heap the scavengers buried their beaks in the trash and flapped their wings – there were no soldiers in sight. He unbuttoned his tunic, took out a manila package and handed it to the cook. The latter passed it under his nose and smelled it with eyes closed.

'Sweet as communion wine.'

The padre blushed and contemplated the packet with sadness.

'I may burn in Hell on their account – but life is a matter of priorities.'

The transaction finished, he took hold of the mess tin with both hands and walked away. The air was cool, yet the sand was still hot. On the other side of the camp was a shabby tent, patched up with old uniforms and tablecloths. Above its entrance was a tin inscription that read, HOLY ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS. Once inside the padre poured the contents of his mess tin through a tea strainer, funnelled the clean oil into an earthen pot and topped up the lamp that hung in front of the altarpiece. Then he sat on the floor with a sigh and poured himself a cup of jasmine tea. He thought: imagine; having to bargain for oil for the lamp. He drank slowly, nodding his head to register his disappointment in human nature.

The penury of the makeshift temple somehow added to the holiness of the place. Almost everything had been fabricated by the padre's inventive hand: the broken lectern that was fixed on a machine-gun tripod, the cases of artillery shells now filled with sand and used in place of candelabra, the four doors hinged together to make an altarpiece. He sipped his tea and studied his work with pride. Breaking his rest, he searched for something to do, and in a minute he set about sweeping the floor. When he had finished it was almost time for vespers. In the middle of the tent was a large brazier filled with charcoal; he kindled it with a bundle of handbills daubed with methylated spirit. While waiting for the fire to build, he glanced at the little pieces of paper he had found that morning pinned on the entrance to his tent. They were handbills advocating insurgency. Similar pieces of paper had been appearing throughout the campaign under trunks, knapsacks and saddles.

The first had been distributed the very day of the landing. No sooner had the troopship with the first detachment of the brigade dropped anchor in Anatolian waters, than its decks were swarming with those little paper squares the soldiers would soon grow familiar with. Blown by the wind, they had reached the

promenade of Smyrna like a cloud of butterflies, where thousands of Christians had assembled to welcome the liberators. It had been an embarrassing incident that had almost cost Brigadier Nestor his command. Since then a number of inquiries had been undertaken, but none had revealed the culprit. Father Simeon had fulminated against the treasonous handbills from the pulpit on several occasions, but they continued to appear.

It was time. The padre took his tunic from the hanger and brushed it inside and out. He removed his liturgical cross from his breast pocket and wore it over his uniform, then put his stole about his shoulders. He dressed with slow movements, whistling and taking his time to pluck the loose threads of his old stole. Having lived alone all his life, he had invested his domestic and religious chores with a transcendental quality. Daily tasks had the ability to take his mind off his loneliness – they were the buoy that kept him on the surface of life, whose darkness terrified him. That was the reason why, when he had joined the expedition, he had promised himself that he would carry on as if he still lived in his village.

When he was ready he stepped out of the tent and shook his handbell. No one came. He knitted his brows and rang the bell louder, but as soon as he stopped silence returned to the camp. He tried a third time. A dog squirmed out from underneath a lorry and came towards him, its ribcage swinging to and fro.

‘What’s the matter, Caleb?’ the padre asked.

Breathing thirstily, the dog raised its head and looked at Father Simeon with dull eyes. The padre rubbed his beard – in truth he was not surprised at what was happening. Once he was convinced that no one was coming to mass, he removed and folded his stole, dropped his cross in his pocket and put on his skullcap – his gaiety had evaporated and he was now upset.

‘It’s useless, Caleb. They have offered themselves to the devil.’

He had been looking forward to vespers. A month ago more than forty soldiers would come to the evening service, but by last week that number had dropped to ten. The evening before he had said mass to a congregation of one deaf bombardier. Father Simeon snapped his fingers and the dog sprang to its feet. Together they walked across the camp. There was a forest of stacked rifles, rows of tents and several fires where coffee pots simmered: the soldiers were resting after another day of continuous marching. The hobbled dromedaries and mules in the corral watched the man and the dog without emotion. The padre wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘A great misfortune, Caleb.’

He puffed, and looked deep into the dog's eyes for some sign of sympathy.