

Sphinx

T. S. Learner

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SPHINX



T.S. LEARNER

SPHERE

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Author's Note

This is a work of fiction written to entertain, inspire and intrigue and should be read as such. Any similarity to a living person or actual institution is entirely coincidental.

Many of the historical characters and their back stories are factual. For example, Nectanebo II did disappear mysteriously at the end of his reign. The character of Banafrit, however, is a literary device. The Antikythera mechanism – the oldest piece of machinery in existence, dating back two thousand years – is authentic, therefore the hypothesis that it might have had predecessors is logical.

Finally, the author would like to make it clear to her readers that she strongly condemns the illegal removal of antiquities from Egypt and any unauthorised exploration, commercial or otherwise.

Prelude

Now, when I look at the desert, I am reminded of the year I spent in Egypt – the most definitive of my life. I never fail to be amazed by how sand resembles granules of glass, orbs made by grains colliding with each other as they shift, trickle and blow in invisible clouds across the horizon.

And I am reminded of how, if I'd had the eye of God that year, if I'd had some omnipresent aerial vision that could have wrapped itself around all the deserts of the world, I would have seen that when sandstorms settle they settle in patterns and those patterns make a cipher – a hidden prophecy.



Abu Rudeis oilfield, Western Sinai, Egypt, 1977

In the distance a dust devil skimmed along the horizon, its trajectory zigzagging with uncanny intelligence. The Bedouin believed such dust storms to be the restless spirits of those who lay unburied, bone-naked, lost in the harsh desert. Was this a bad omen? Worried that the roughnecks might think so, I glanced over. The fieldworkers, big fearless men, their overalls blackened with grime and oil, were paused in awe, tools in hand, staring at the phenomenon.

The rumble of the generators rolled out over the sand like the growling of some colossal animal, across the patch of ground where the pump jacks and rigs of the Abu Rudeis oilfield stood, the derricks sentries against the bleached sky. Captured by Israel in the 1967 war, the oilfield had been returned to Egyptian control only two years before – in November 1975 – and army tanks still patrolled its perimeters. I could see one now, slowly cruising in the distance. With the Israeli border not far away this was a combustive landscape. Despite recent attempts by Egypt's President Sadat to normalise relations between the two countries, the atmosphere

was tense, the whole area a tinderbox. It felt as if any sudden movement – a jeep careering off course, a bout of careless yelling – might trigger another jaw-rattling exchange of fire.

Over at the control tower, the rest of the crew were hovering, waiting for me to give the final command to start drilling. A jeep was parked nearby with its door open, the driver tuning his car radio, the bulge of his pistol rippling under his jacket as he moved. Country and western music collided with the melancholic voice of singer Mohamed Abdel Wahab, the plaintive Arabic ballad blasting out with the heat across the blindingly white plains.

‘Mr Warnock!’ the driver shouted, pointing to the fake Rolex watch that had appeared from under the sleeve of his jellaba. I nodded and swung around to face the newly constructed rig. The derrick hung suspended over the rocky ground; the crew gathered by the control panel stared at me, tense with anticipation, watching for the thumbs-down: the signal to begin drilling. My assistant, Moustafa Saheer, catching my eye, grinned and nodded.

In the same instant I lifted my hand to signal ‘go’ there was a huge explosion. I threw myself to the ground, a burst of gunfire followed.

An image of Isabella, my wife, shot through my mind – she was stepping out of the shower, her wet hair hanging down to her waist, her smile enticing, wry. It was eight weeks earlier – the last time I’d seen her.

Lifting my head carefully I glanced over my shoulder. Just a few metres away, spewing oil had ignited into a single blazing pillar. ‘Blowout!’ I shouted, frightened that the fire would spread to our own well. Already the crew were clambering down, frantic, limbs tumbling over limbs. Nearby, a panicked soldier sprinted towards the inferno, firing his automatic rifle uselessly into the air.

‘Get in! Get in!’ the driver screamed to me. Running for my life, I bolted for the jeep.

We drove back to the camp in silence as black smoke billowed alongside the road. Moustafa stared out of the back window at the blazing oil well, now a flaming tower receding into the distance.

He had trained in Budapest and spoke perfect English with a private-school accent, but it had been his methodical analysis of data as well as his easygoing camaraderie with the roughnecks – an asset in politically anxious times – that had impressed me. This was the third project I’d hired him for, and we had developed a concise communication based on an understanding of each other’s personalities and boundaries; essential out in the field where it was often too noisy to hear anyone speak.

‘All those months of calculation gone.’ Moustafa’s expression was lugubrious.

‘C’mon, at least it’s not the new well burning. The company will cap the fire and we’ll start our drilling a few weeks late.’

‘A few weeks is still a great deal of money. This is bad for my country.’

After President Nasser nationalised the Egyptian oil industry in 1956, he insisted that local men replace the mainly Italian, French and Greek fieldworkers. But when Nasser died of a sudden heart attack in 1970, his heir, Anwar El Sadat, had introduced an open-door policy again. The consultancy company I worked for – GeoConsultancy – was part of that policy. I’d been brought in by the Alexandrian Oil Company to assess whether they should drill south of the existing oilfield and develop a deeper, as yet untested, reservoir. This landscape was second nature to me, a place where

my soul sprang into thirsty agitation. I read terrain like the blind read Braille. Known as The Diviner, I had a reputation as the best geophysicist in the industry, famous for my ability to discover oil. But the moniker made me uncomfortable: it seemed to suggest that I had some mystical talent. In reality, I was meticulous in my scientific research but also prepared to take the extra gamble many others were frightened to.

After six months, with the help of Moustafa, we'd finally convinced them that the new field was worth the risk.

The sound of the explosion still rang in my ears but my heartbeat steadied slowly. I turned back towards the skyline; dusk had reduced the sea to an inky charcoal and the rippling waves glittered randomly. The sky was a burnt orange; the off-shore oil rigs were silhouetted on the horizon like marooned ships with bizarrely oversized masks, islands of industry. It was a sight that never failed to inspire me. I sniffed my fingers; they smelled of smoke and burning oil. The blowout had thrown some things into perspective. Isabella, for one. The last time I'd seen her we'd fought and we hadn't spoken since. When I threw myself on the sand to save myself from the billowing flames, I was suddenly convinced that we would never get the chance to be reconciled. The thought that I might never see her again was devastating.

Oil geologists spend a lot of time by themselves, analysing seismic data or studying core samples on site. You develop a certain self-sufficiency, the roar of your own blood filling your head until you find yourself deaf to other people. But after five years of marriage I had become welded to Isabella. We were the same animal, both of us fascinated by the way history folded itself into the ground, the trail of clues left by previous civilisations.

As a marine archaeologist, Isabella's hunting fields were the valleys and cliffs of the sea floor. Now, driving along the

coast road that hugged the eastern edge of the Suez Canal, I wondered whether she had continued with her underwater exploration, even after our heated argument about it. She was searching for an ancient object, an astrarium, which she believed was a prototype of the Antikythera Mechanism, an artefact dating back to the times of Cleopatra and possibly even earlier, found off the coast of Rhodes in 1901. The Antikythera Mechanism itself was an anomaly: nothing as mechanically sophisticated had existed for over a thousand years after its construction. Nevertheless Isabella was convinced that it must have had predecessors. My wife was a maverick in her field, famous for making discoveries based on a few facts and an intuitive sense of where a site might lie. Her hunches were often uncannily correct – something that unnerved many of her contemporaries. She had been researching the astrarium for years and now believed she was in the last months of her quest, having narrowed her search to Aboukir Bay near Alexandria, where the drowned suburb of Herakleion lay, close to the submerged island of Antirrhodos, home to Cleopatra's palace, all destroyed by a tsunami twelve hundred years earlier. Against my advice (and the cause of a series of bitter arguments) she'd recently embarked on a series of illegal dives. There was a new desperation to Isabella's obsession and it had begun to frighten me.

By the time we arrived at the field camp and pulled up beside the cluster of corrugated-iron worker cabins, I'd decided that regardless of what the company demanded I would fly back to Alexandria early the next morning.

Eight hours later the well was still burning, despite the efforts of a ground crew working around the clock. The sand

berms that the tractors had pushed up around the well had contained the blaze, but thousands of dollars' worth of precious oil continued to go up in smoke.

'It is impossible to put out the fire, my friend.' Mohamed, the manager of the oilfield and an usually cheerful man in his forties, appeared defeated. His large moon-shaped face seemed to have deflated around the collar of his stained boiler suit and his eyes glared out from below a soot-smeared brow. 'Forty men, their equipment and who knows how many gallons of expensive foam and the bastard is still burning. Any minute now the rest will go up and I will have an even greater catastrophe on my hands. A curse on the Israelis.'

'This wasn't sabotage,' I said. 'This was bad luck and maybe some negligence.'

'Negligence! We do what we can with the equipment available, but we are still catching up after the Israelis ruined the wells. Is that my fault?'

'I think it's time to look for some outside help,' I suggested carefully.

'Never! Our roustabouts will get it under control eventually.'

"Eventually" will be too late.'

I tried to contain the anger in my voice. Mohamed was quite capable of compromising the machinery to avoid losing face.

As the manager scowled at me, Moustafa, who had been listening to our exchange, stepped forward smoothly. I didn't stop him. Both of us knew he had the temperament and diplomacy to deal with the site manager's bursts of grievance, usually aimed indiscriminately at both government and private enterprise. Such tantrums had got three of my best field hands fired already.

Moustafa's tone was conciliatory. 'Mr Warnock did not mean to insult your professionalism, Mohamed. It is a major fire and it's going to take the best team around to extinguish the blaze. He merely meant to suggest that perhaps you might consider bringing in outside expertise.'

I glanced out the office window. A poisonous-looking fog billowed above the blaze, snaking out across the landscape and staining everything in its path.

'I know a firefighting company run by a Texan called Bill Anderson,' I said. 'He's not cheap but he's the guy. He could be here within forty-eight hours.'

I'd first met Bill Anderson in Angola. After an abortive negotiation with a rebel leader and self-appointed oil tycoon had failed to materialise, my company had hired a small plane to fly me quickly out of the country. Bill had been in nearby Nigeria, putting out a government oil well that had been sabotaged by the same rebel leader, and had about as much affection for the region as I did. Between us we'd managed to persuade the manager of the local airfield to let us hide in his cellar until the next available Cessna arrived. We'd had nothing except a bucket, a crate of whisky and a pack of playing cards. By the end of the second night, we were violently disagreeing over philosophy, religion and politics. By the morning, we were lifelong friends.

'Forty-eight hours! I haven't got forty-eight hours!' Mohamed slammed his desk in frustration.

'You still have thirty intact wells, plus a brand-new drilling rig just waiting to go. You have forty-eight hours.' I scribbled down Anderson's telephone number. 'I'm going back to Alex until this is fixed. I can't open a potential new reservoir with this going on above ground – it's too dangerous.'

'The company won't like it.'

'That, my friend, is your problem.'

Mohamed sighed. 'One week, Oliver, then I promise the fire will be out, all the wells will be pumping again and you can start your drilling, *inshallah*.'

'God willing indeed.' I tucked the phone number into his breast pocket. 'You know where to find me.'

It was about five in the morning by the time I got back to Alexandria and the weather was deteriorating rapidly. There was no phone at the company villa we were living in, which was not unusual – telephones were rare in Egypt and most people had to go to the post office to book a call. So I had been unable to warn Isabella of my return and I was apprehensive about having to surprise her. Despite her own dangerous exploration dives, Isabella did not approve of the hazards I faced in my own profession. But she knew nothing about the explosion and I didn't intend to tell her about it. All I craved now was a truce and to have her back in my arms.

I hauled my luggage as quietly as possible across the cobbled back lane towards the old colonial villa. The security guard was just finishing his night shift and he let me in through the wrought-iron back gate; the enclosed garden was a sanctuary from the storm now buffeting the palm trees. Tinnin, the Alsatian guard dog, began to bark at the sound of my footfall. I murmured his name and he dropped to the ground whimpering, ears flattened.

As I pulled out my key I watched the window of the housekeeper's flat carefully. Ibrihim was a cautious, taciturn man; he was also a heavy sleeper. I shut the oak door behind me and slipped into the large entrance hall. The canaries in their old-fashioned wire cage twittered wildly as the wind rattled the shutters of the French windows. I closed the windows quickly and hurried to calm the birds.

The house had been built in the 1920s and was an idiosyncratic blend of cubism with Islamic architectural overtones. The villa itself had once housed the representative of the original British-owned Bell Oil Company, as it was known before Nasser nationalised it. It had been one of the most desirable postings in colonial Egypt, enabling the well-spoken aspirational English employee to socialise with the wealthy European families who used to run both the cotton and oil industries. Families like Isabella's – Italians who had migrated in the mid-nineteenth century and had built up powerful dynasties over the preceding century. A photograph of Nasser now hung where the portrait of the original owner had once been – a wonderful metaphor for the toppled ruling class. One evening, smiling furtively, Ibrihim had shown me the usurped and now hidden portrait – with a fez perched above his jowly Edwardian face the old patriarch looked like the ultimate colonial pasha, a dethroned prince exiled by revolution.

In the political chaos much of the original furniture had also been abandoned. Like many Alexandrian Europeans during the Suez Crisis in 1956, the plant manager had fled overnight but the Art Deco furniture, sofas and wall hangings remained; mementos of obscene wealth, all lovingly maintained by Ibrihim.

The bedroom door was ajar. The curtains were drawn and it was dark inside; I almost stumbled over an oxygen cylinder abandoned on the floor next to a wetsuit and a diving mask. In the dim light I could just make out Isabella's sleeping form sprawled on top of the bedcovers.

Quietly, I switched on a side lamp. There were maps spread out over the rugs – the spidery cartography of the sea floor, a parallel subterranean landscape, seductive in its mystery. In the middle of this pile lay a sheet of paper showing

a drawing of a metal contraption: a fantastical device of dials and cogs held together in a wooden casing. The dials were engraved with a series of marks or symbols, like clock faces. I knew this was a fictional depiction of the astrarium drawn by my art-student brother Gareth. Isabella was close to Gareth, closer than I was in fact, and had commissioned the illustration after briefing him from snippets of visual research that she had amassed over the years. And now here it was – my nemesis, the one thing we always argued about – placed like a shrine in the centre of the floor.

Oblivious to the outside world, Isabella had fallen asleep with her clothes on. As I picked my way across the scattered papers it was easy to imagine her exhausted, falling across the bed after a day of diving. I didn't have the heart to wake her.

Instead, I sat in a battered leather armchair and watched her. The moonlight filtered in to illuminate her strong face.

Isabella wasn't a beautiful woman in any conventional sense of the word. Her profile was just a little too angular to be considered feminine, her lips a little too thin. She had no breasts to speak of, I could almost span the width of her hips with one hand, and there was a constant hunger in the way she held her body, a tipping forward as if she was always ready to run. But her eyes were exquisite. Her irises were black; a kind of ebony that changed to violet if you stared long enough. They were the most startling aspect of her face; disproportionately large, the rest of her features seemed to fall away from them. Then there were her hands – beautiful working hands with long fingers – tanned and worn, showing the hours immersed in water or spent painstakingly piecing together ancient objects.

Outside the villa, a nightjar churred. Isabella stirred, groaned and rolled onto her side. I smiled and sighed, regretting our argument and the subsequent long weeks of angry

silence. Isabella was how I anchored myself: to culture, to emotion, to place. And I was a man who craved place. I had grown up in a mining village in Cumbria and sometimes even now, in my dreams, I saw the sweeping plains of Ordovician limestone, the landscape of my childhood. I was drawn to solidity, to the slower-evolving manifestations of nature. If I were to describe myself it would be as a listener, a man of few words. Isabella was different. She used language to define herself, to ambush the moment and talk it into history. Nevertheless, she was able to read stillness, especially my stillness. That was the second reason why I'd fallen in love with her.

Isabella did not move. Finally I couldn't help myself. I leaned over and she woke, consciousness travelling slowly across her face to finally form a smile. Without saying anything she reached up and wrapped her arms around me. I sank down and joined her on the bed.

Isabella's sexuality was an organic part of her nature; a spontaneous wildness that kept us both excited. We made love in exotic places: a telephone booth, beneath the tarpaulin of a boat in full view of the busy Indian port of Kochi, on the Scottish moors. But whatever the context, Isabella liked to stay in control. With her eyelashes brushing my cheeks, we kissed and I caressed her. Soon it felt as if there was nothing but the flame of her irises, her hardening nipples, her wetness.

I lay there afterwards, curled around her as she slipped back into sleep. Staring across the room, I listened to the sound of the rain lashing the windows. My last thought was one of thanks – for my marriage, for my life, for surviving. One of those moments of clarity one has in the dead of night: a quiet realisation that this might be happiness.