

Panther

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**the day
of forever**

panther science fiction

The central part of the book cover features an abstract, painterly illustration. It consists of several thick, curved, overlapping bands of color. The top band is a vibrant blue, transitioning into a purple and pinkish hue. Below it, a green band curves across the middle, and a yellow-green band is visible at the bottom. The background is a deep, dark black, which makes the colors stand out. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and futuristic aesthetic.

the day of forever

At Columbine Sept Heures it was always dusk. Here Halliday's beautiful neighbour, Gabrielle Szabo, walked through the evening, her silk robe stirring the fine sand into cerise clouds. From the balcony of the empty hotel near the artists' colony, Halliday would look out over the drained river at the unmoving shadows across the desert floor, the twilight of Africa, endless and unbroken, that beckoned to him with the promise of his lost dreams. The dark dunes, their crests touched by the spectral light, receded like the waves of a midnight sea.

Despite the almost static light, fixed at this unending dusk, the drained bed of the river seemed to flow with colours. As the sand spilled from the banks, uncovering the veins of quartz and the concrete caissons of the embankment, the evening would flare briefly, illuminated from within like a lava sea. Beyond the dunes the spires of old water towers and the half-completed apartment blocks near the Roman ruins at Leptis Magna emerged from the darkness. To the south, as Halliday followed the winding course of the river, the darkness gave way to the deep indigo tracts of the irrigation project, the lines of canals forming an exquisite bonelike gridwork.

This continuous transformation, whose colours were as strange as the bizarre paintings hung from the walls of his suite, seemed to Halliday to reveal the hidden perspectives of the landscape, and of the time whose hands were almost frozen on the dozen clocks standing on the mantelpiece and tables. The clocks, set to the imperceptible time of the forever day, he had brought with him to North Africa in the hope that here,

in the psychic zero of the desert, they might somehow spring to life. The dead clocks that stared down from the municipal towers and hotels of the deserted towns were the unique flora of the desert, the unused keys that would turn the way into his dreams.

With this hope, three months earlier he had come to Columbine Sept Heures. The suffix, attached to the names of all cities and towns – there were London 6 p.m. and Saigon Midnight – indicated their positions on the Earth's almost stationary perimeter, the time of the endless day where the no longer rotating planet had marooned them. For five years Halliday had been living in the international settlement at Trondheim in Norway, a zone of eternal snow and ice, of pine forests whose arbours, fed by the unsetting sun, rose ever higher around the fringes of the towns, shutting them into their own isolation. This world of Nordic gloom had exposed all Halliday's latent difficulties with time and with his dreams. The difficulty of sleeping, even in a darkened room, disturbed everyone – there was the sense of time wasted and yet time unpassed as the sun hung stationary in the sky – but Halliday in particular found himself obsessed by his broken dreams. Time and again he would wake with an image before his eyes of the moonlit squares and classical façades of an ancient Mediterranean town, and of a woman who walked through colonnades in a world without shadows.

This warm night world he could find only by moving south. Two hundred miles to the east of Trondheim the dusk line was a corridor of freezing wind and ice, stretching on into the Russian steppe, where abandoned cities lay under the glaciers like closed jewels. By contrast, in Africa the night air was still warm. On the west of the dusk line was the boiling desert of the Sahara, the sand seas fused into lakes of glass, but along the narrow band of the terminator a few people lived in the old tourist towns.

It was here, at Columbine Sept Heures, an abandoned town beside the drained river five miles from Leptis Magna, that he first saw Gabrielle Szabo walking toward him as if out of his dreams. Here, too, he met Leonora Sully, the fey unconcerned painter of bizarre fantasies, and Dr. Richard Mallory, who tried to help Halliday and bring back his dreams to him.

Why Leonora was at Columbine Sept Heures Halliday could

understand, but sometimes he suspected that Dr. Mallory's motives were as ambiguous as his own. The tall aloof physician, eyes forever hidden behind the dark glasses that seemed to emphasize his closed inner life, spent most of his time sitting in the white-domed auditorium of the School of Fine Arts, playing through the Bartok and Webern quartets left behind in the albums.

This music was the first sound Halliday heard when he arrived at the desert town. In the abandoned car park near the quay at Tripoli he found a new Peugeot left behind by a French refinery technician and set off south along the seven o'clock line, passing through the dusty towns and the half-buried silver skeletons of the refineries near the drained river. To the west the desert burned in a haze of gold under the unmoving sun. Rippled by the thermal waves, the metal vanes of the waterwheels by the empty irrigation systems seemed to revolve in the hot air, swerving toward him.

To the east the margins of the river were etched against the dark horizon, the ridges of exposed limestone like the forestage of the twilight world. Halliday turned toward the river, the light fading as he moved eastward, and followed the old metal road that ran near the bank. The centre of the channel, where white rocks jutted from the drifts of pebbles, lay like the spine of an ancient saurian.

A few miles from the coast he found Columbine Sept Heures. Four tourist hotels, their curtain walls like dead mirrors, stood among the dunes that drifted through the streets and overran the chalets and swimming pools near the Fine Arts School. The road disappeared from sight outside the Oasis Hotel. Halliday left the car and walked up the steps to the dust-filled lobby. The sand lay in lacelike patterns across the tiled floor, silting against the pastel-coloured elevator doors and the dead palms by the restaurant.

Halliday walked up the stairway to the mezzanine, and stood by the cracked plateglass window beyond the tables. Already half submerged by the sand, what remained of the town seemed displaced by the fractured glass into another set of dimensions, as if space itself were compensating for the landscape's loss of time by forcing itself into this bizarre warp.

Already decided that he would stay in the hotel, Halliday went out to search for water and whatever food supplies had

been left behind. The streets were deserted, choked with the sand advancing toward the drained river. At intervals the clouded windows of a Citroën or Peugeot emerged from the dunes. Stepping along their roofs, Halliday entered the drive of the Fine Arts School. Against the cerise pall of the dusk, the angular building rose into the air like a white bird.

In the students' gallery hung the fading reproductions of a dozen schools of painting, for the most part images of worlds without meaning. However, grouped together in a small alcove Halliday found the surrealists Delvaux, Chirico and Ernst. These strange landscapes, inspired by dreams that his own could no longer echo, filled Halliday with a profound sense of nostalgia. One above all, Delvaux's 'The Echo', which depicted a naked Junoesque woman walking among immaculate ruins under a midnight sky, reminded him of his own recurrent fantasy. The infinite longing contained in the picture, the synthetic time created by the receding images of the woman, belonged to the landscape of his unseen night. Halliday found an old portfolio on the floor below one of the trestles and began to strip the paintings from the walls.

As he walked across the roof to the outside stairway above the auditorium music was playing below him. Halliday searched the faces of the empty hotels, whose curtain walls lifted into the sunset air. Beyond the Fine Arts School the chalets of the students quarter were grouped around two drained swimming pools.

Reaching the auditorium, he peered through the glass doors across the rows of empty seats. In the centre of the front row a man in a white suit and sunglasses was sitting with his back to Halliday. Whether he was actually listening to the music Halliday could not tell, but when the record ended three or four minutes later he stood up and climbed onto the stage. He switched off the stereogram and then strolled over to Halliday, his high face with its slightly inquistorial look hidden behind the dark glasses.

'I'm Mallory - Dr. Mallory.' He held out a strong but oblique hand. 'Are you staying here?'

The question seemed to contain a complete understanding of Halliday's motives. Putting down his portfolio, Halliday introduced himself. 'I'm at the Oasis. I arrived this evening.'

Realizing that the remark was meaningless, Halliday laughed, but Mallory was already smiling.

'This evening? I think we can take that for granted.' When Halliday raised his wrist to reveal the old 24-hour Rolex he still wore, Mallory nodded, straightening his sunglasses as if looking at Halliday more closely. 'You still have one, do you? What is the time, by the way?'

Halliday glanced at the Rolex. It was one of four he had brought with him, carefully synchronized with the master 24-hour clock still running at Greenwich Observatory, recording the vanished time of the once-revolving earth. 'Nearly 7.30. That would be right. Isn't this Columbine Sept Heures?'

'True enough. A neat coincidence. However, the dusk line is advancing; I'd say it was a little later here. Still, I think we can take the point.' Mallory stepped down from the stage, where his tall figure had stood over Halliday like a white gallows. 'Seven-thirty, old time - and new. You'll have to stay at Columbine. It's not often one finds the dimensions looking like that.' He glanced at the portfolio. 'You're at the Oasis. Why there?'

'It's empty.'

'Cogent. But so is everything else here. Even so, I know what you mean, I stayed there myself when I first came to Columbine. It's damned hot.'

'I'll be on the dusk side.'

Mallory inclined his head in a small bow, as if acknowledging Halliday's seriousness. He went over to the stereogram and disconnected a motor-car battery on the floor beside it. He placed the heavy unit in a canvas carryall and gave Halliday one of the handles. 'You can help me. I have a small generator at my chalet. It's difficult to re-charge, but good batteries are becoming scarce.'

As they walked out into the sunlight Halliday said, 'You can have the battery in my car.'

Mallory stopped. 'That's kind of you, Halliday. But are you sure you won't want it? There are other places than Columbine.'

'Perhaps. But I take it there's enough food for us all here.' Halliday gestured with his wristwatch. 'Anyway, the time is right. Or both times, I suppose.'

'And as many spaces as you want, Halliday. Not all of them around you. Why have you come here?'

'I don't know yet. I was living at Trondheim; I couldn't

sleep there. If I can sleep again, perhaps I can dream.'

He started to explain himself but Mallory raised a hand to silence him. 'Why do you think we're all here, Halliday? Out of Africa, dreams walk. You must meet Leonora. She'll like you.'

They walked past the empty chalets, the first of the swimming pools on their right. In the sand on the bottom someone had traced out a huge zodiac pattern, decorated with shells and pieces of fractured tile. They approached the next pool. A sand dune had inundated one of the chalets and spilled into the basin, but a small area of the terrace had been cleared. Below an awning a young woman with white hair sat on a metal chair in front of an easel. Her jeans and the man's shirt she wore were streaked with paint, but her intelligent face, set above a strong jaw, seemed composed and alert. She looked up as Dr. Mallory and Halliday lowered the battery to the ground.

'I've brought a pupil for you, Leonora.' Mallory beckoned Halliday over. 'He's staying at the Oasis - on the *dusk* side.'

The young woman gestured Halliday toward a reclining chair beside the easel. He placed the portfolio against the back rest. 'They're for my room at the hotel,' he explained. 'I'm not a painter.'

'Of course. May I look at them?' Without waiting she began to leaf through the reproductions, nodding to herself at each one. Halliday glanced at the half-completed painting on the easel, a landscape across which bizarre figures moved in a strange procession, archbishops wearing fantastic mitres. He looked up at Mallory, who gave him a wry nod.

'Interesting, Halliday?'

'Of course. What about *your* dreams, doctor? Where do you keep them?'

Mallory made no reply, gazing down at Halliday with his dark sealed eyes. With a laugh, dispelling the slight tension between the two men, Leonora sat down on the chair beside Halliday.

'Richard won't tell us that, Mr. Halliday. When we find his dreams we'll no longer need our own.'

This remark Halliday was to repeat to himself often over the subsequent months. In many ways Mallory's presence in the town seemed a key to all their roles. The white-suited

physician, moving about silently through the sand-filled streets, seemed like the spectre of the forgotten noon, reborn at dusk to drift like his music between the empty hotels. Even at their first meeting, when Halliday sat beside Leonora, making a few automatic remarks but conscious only of her hips and shoulder touching his own, he sensed that Mallory, whatever his reasons for being in Columbine, had adjusted himself all too completely to the ambiguous world of the dusk line. For Mallory, Columbine Sept Heures and the desert had already become part of the inner landscapes that Halliday and Leonora Sully still had to find in their paintings.

However, during his first weeks in the town by the drained river Halliday thought more of Leonora and of settling himself in the hotel. Using the 24-hour Rolex, he still tried to sleep at 'midnight', waking (or more exactly, conceding the fact of his insomnia) seven hours later. Then, at the start of his 'morning', he would make a tour of the paintings hung on the walls of the seventh-floor suite, and go out into the town, searching the hotel kitchens and pantries for supplies of water and canned food. At this time - an arbitrary interval he imposed on the neutral landscape - he would keep his back to the eastern sky, avoiding the dark night that reached from the desert across the drained river. To the west the brilliant sand beneath the overheated sun shivered like the last dawn of the world.

At these moments Dr. Mallory and Leonora seemed at their most tired, as if their bodies were still aware of the rhythms of the former 24-hour day. Both of them slept at random intervals - often Halliday would visit Leonora's chalet and find her asleep on the reclining chair by the pool, her face covered by the veil of white hair, shielded from the sun by the painting on her easel. These strange fantasies, with their images of bishops and cardinals moving in procession across ornamental landscapes, were her only activity.

By contrast, Mallory would vanish like a white vampire into his chalet, then emerge, refreshed in some way, a few hours later. After the first weeks Halliday came to terms with Mallory, and the two men would listen to the Webern quartets in the auditorium or play chess near Leonora beside the empty swimming pool. Halliday tried to discover how Leonora and Mallory had come to the town, but neither would answer his questions. He gathered only that they had arrived separately in Africa

several years earlier and had been moving westward from town to town as the terminator crossed the continent.

On occasion, Mallory would go off into the desert on some unspecified errand, and then Halliday would see Leonora alone. Together they would walk along the bed of the drained river, or dance to the recordings of Masai chants in the anthropology library. Halliday's growing dependence on Leonora was tempered by the knowledge that he had come to Africa to seek, not this white-haired young woman with her amiable eyes, but the night-walking lamia within his own mind. As if aware of this, Leonora remained always detached, smiling at Halliday across the strange paintings on her easel.

This pleasant *ménage à trois* was to last for three months. During this time the dusk line advanced another half mile toward Columbine Sept Heures, and at last Mallory and Leonora decided to move to a small refinery town ten miles to the west. Halliday half expected Leonora to stay with him at Columbine, but she left with Mallory in the Peugeot. Sitting in the back seat, she waited as Mallory played the last Bartok quartet in the auditorium before disconnecting the battery and carrying it back to the car.

Curiously, it was Mallory who tried to persuade Halliday to leave with them. Unlike Leonora, the still unresolved elements in his relationship with Halliday made him wish to keep in touch with the younger man.

'Halliday, you'll find it difficult staying on here.' Mallory pointed across the river to the pall of darkness that hung like an immense wave over the town. Already the colours of the walls and streets had changed to the deep cyclamen of dusk. 'The night is coming. Do you realize what that means?'

'Of course, doctor. I've waited for it.'

'But, Halliday ...' Mallory searched for a phrase. His tall figure, eyes hidden as ever by the dark glasses, looked up at Halliday across the steps of the hotel. 'You aren't an owl, or some damned desert cat. You've got to come to terms with this thing in the daylight.'

Giving up, Mallory went back to the car. He waved as they set off, reversing onto one of the dunes in a cloud of pink dust, but Halliday made no reply. He was watching Leonora Sully in the back seat with her canvas and easels, the stack of bizarre paintings that were echoes of her unseen dreams.

Whatever his feelings for Leonora, they were soon forgotten with his discovery a month later of a second beautiful neighbor at Columbine Sept Heures.

Half a mile to the northeast of Columbine, across the drained river, was an empty colonial mansion, once occupied by the managers of the refinery at the mouth of the river. As Halliday sat on his balcony on the seventh floor of the Oasis Hotel, trying to detect the imperceptible progress of the terminator, while the antique clocks around him ticked mechanically through the minutes and hours of their false days, he would notice the white façades of the house illuminated briefly in the reflected light of the sandstorms. Its terraces were covered with dust, and the columns of the loggia beside the swimming pool had toppled into the basin. Although only four hundred yards to the east of the hotel, the empty shell of the house seemed already within the approaching night.

Shortly before one of his attempts to sleep Halliday saw the headlamps of a car moving around the house. Its beams revealed a solitary figure who walked slowly up and down the terrace. Abandoning any pretence at sleep, Halliday climbed to the roof of the hotel, ten stories above, and lay down on the suicide sill. A chauffeur was unloading suitcases from the car. The figure on the terrace, a tall woman in a black robe, walked with the random, uncertain movements of someone barely aware of what she was doing. After a few minutes the chauffeur took the woman by the arm, as if waking her from some kind of sleep.

Halliday watched from the roof, waiting for them to reappear. The strange trancelike movements of this beautiful woman - already her dark hair and the pale nimbus of her face drifting like a lantern on the incoming dusk convinced him that she was the dark lamia of all his dreams - reminded Halliday of his own first strolls across the dunes to the river, the testing of ground unknown but familiar from his sleep.

When he went down to his suite he lay on the brocaded settee in the sitting room, surrounded by the landscapes of Delvaux and Ernst, and fell suddenly into a deep slumber. There he saw his first true dreams, of classical ruins under a midnight sky, where moonlit figures moved past each other in a city of the dead.

The dreams were to recur each time Halliday slept. He would wake on the settee by the picture window, the darkening floor of the desert below, aware of the dissolving boundaries between his inner and outer worlds. Already two of the clocks below the mantelpiece mirror had stopped. With their end he would at last be free of his former notions of time.

At the end of this week Halliday discovered that the woman slept at the same intervals as he did, going out to look at the desert as Halliday stepped onto his balcony. Although his solitary figure stood out clearly against the dawn sky behind the hotel the woman seemed not to notice him. Halliday watched the chauffeur drive the white Mercedes into the town. In his dark uniform he moved past the fading walls of the Fine Arts School like a shadow without form.

Halliday went down into the street and walked toward the dusk. Crossing the river, a drained Rubicon dividing his passive world at Columbine Sept Heures from the reality of the coming night, Halliday climbed the opposite bank past the wrecks of old cars and gasoline drums illuminated in the crepuscular light. As he neared the house the woman was walking among the sand-covered statuary in the garden, the crystals lying on the stone faces like the condensation of immense epochs of time.

Halliday hesitated by the low wall that encircled the house, waiting for the woman to look toward him. Her pale face, its high forehead rising above the dark glasses in some ways reminded him of Dr. Mallory, the same screen that concealed a potent inner life. The fading light lingered among the angular planes of her temples as she searched the town for any signs of the Mercedes.

She was sitting in one of the chairs on the terrace when Halliday reached her, hands folded in the pockets of the silk robe so that only her pale face, with its marred beauty – the sun-glasses seemed to shut it off like some inward night, was exposed to him.

Halliday stood by the glass-topped table, uncertain how to introduce himself. 'I'm staying at the Oasis – at Columbine Sept Heures,' he began. 'I saw you from the balcony.' He pointed to the distant tower of the hotel, its cerise façade raised against the dimming air.

'A neighbour?' The woman nodded at this. 'Thank you for

calling on me. I'm Gabrielle Szabo. Are there many of you?'

'No – they've gone. There were only two of them anyway, a doctor and a young woman painter, Leonora Sully – the landscape here suited her.'

'Of course. A doctor, though?' The woman had taken her hands from her robe. They lay in her lap like a pair of fragile doves. 'What was he doing here?'

'Nothing.' Halliday wondered whether to sit down, but the woman made no attempt to offer him the other chair, as if she expected him to drift away as suddenly as he had arrived. 'Now and then he helped me with my dreams.'

'Dreams?' She turned her head toward him, the light revealing the slightly hollowed contours above her eyes. 'Are there dreams at Columbine Sept Heures, Mr.—'

'Halliday. There are dreams now. The night is coming.'

The woman nodded, raising her face to the violet-hued dusk. 'I can feel it on my face – like a black sun. What do you dream about, Mr. Halliday?'

Halliday almost blurted out the truth but with a shrug he said, 'This and that. An old ruined town – you know, full of classical monuments. Anyway, I did last night . . .' He smiled at this. 'I still have some of the old clocks left. The others have stopped.'

Along the river a plume of gilded dust lifted from the road. The white Mercedes sped toward them.

'Have you been to Leptis Magna, Mr. Halliday?'

'The Roman town? It's by the coast, five miles from here. If you like, I'll go with you.'

'A good idea. This doctor you mentioned, Mr. Halliday – where has he gone? My chauffeur . . . needs some treatment.'

Halliday hesitated. Something about the woman's voice suggested that she might easily lose interest in him. Not wanting to compete with Mallory again, he answered, 'To the north, I think; to the coast. He was leaving Africa. Is it urgent?'

Before she could reply Halliday was aware of the dark figure of the chauffeur, buttoned within his black uniform, standing a few yards behind him. Only a moment earlier the car had been a hundred yards down the road, but with an effort Halliday accepted this quantal jump in time. The chauffeur's small

face, with its sharp eyes and tight mouth, regarded Halliday without comment.

'Gaston, this is Mr. Halliday. He's staying at one of the hotels at Columbine Sept Heures. Perhaps you could give him a lift to the river crossing.'

Halliday was about to accept, but the chauffeur made no response to the suggestion. Halliday felt himself shiver in the cooler air moving toward the river out of the dusk. He bowed to Gabrielle Szabo and walked off past the chauffeur. As he stopped, about to remind her of the trip to Leptis Magna, he heard her say, 'Gaston, there was a doctor here.'

The meaning of this oblique remark remained hidden from Halliday as he watched the house from the roof of the Oasis Hotel. Gabrielle Szabo sat on the terrace in the dusk, while the chauffeur made his foraging journeys to Columbine and the refineries along the river. Once Halliday came across him as he rounded a corner near the Fine Arts School, but the man merely nodded and trudged on with his jerrican of water. Halliday postponed a further visit to the house. Whatever her motives for being there, and whoever she was, Gabrielle Szabo had brought him the dreams that Columbine Sept Heures and his long journey south had failed to provide. Besides, the presence of the woman, turning some key in his mind, was all he required. Rewinding his clocks, he found that he slept for eight or nine hours of the nights he set himself.

However, a week later he found himself again failing to sleep. Deciding to visit his neighbour, he went out across the river, walking into the dusk that lay ever deeper across the sand. As he reached the house the white Mercedes was setting off along the road to the coast. In the back Gabrielle Szabo sat close to the open window, the dark wind drawing her black hair into the slipstream.

Halliday waited as the car came toward him, slowing as the driver recognized him. Gaston's head leaned back, his tight mouth framing Halliday's name. Expecting the car to stop, Halliday stepped out into the road.

'Gabrielle . . . Miss Szabo—'

She leaned forward, and the white car accelerated and swerved around him, the cerise dust cutting his eyes as he watched the woman's masked face borne away from him.

Halliday returned to the hotel and climbed to the roof, but the car had disappeared into the darkness of the northeast, its wake fading into the dusk. He went down to his suite and paced around the paintings. The last of the clocks had almost run down. Carefully he wound each one, glad for the moment to be free of Gabrielle Szabo and the dark dream she had drawn across the desert.

When the clocks were going again he went down to the basement. For ten minutes he moved from car to car, stepping in and out of the Cadillacs and Citroëns. None of the cars would start, but in the service bay he found a Honda motorcycle, and after filling the tank managed to kick the engine into life. As he set off from Columbine the sounds of the exhaust reverberated off the walls around him, but a mile from the town, when he stopped to adjust the carburettor, the town seemed to have been abandoned for years, his own presence obliterated as quickly as his shadow.

He drove westward, the dawn rising to meet him. Its colours lightened, the ambiguous contours of the dusk giving way to the clear outlines of the dunes along the horizon, the isolated watertowers standing like welcoming beacons.

Losing his way when the road disappeared into the sand sea, Halliday drove the motorcycle across the open desert. A mile to the west he came to the edge of an old wadi. He tried to drive the cycle down the bank, then lost his balance and sprawled onto his back as the machine leapt away and somersaulted among the rocks. Halliday trudged across the floor of the wadi to the opposite bank. Ahead of him, its silver gantries and tank farms shining in the dawn light, was an abandoned refinery and the white roofs of the near-by staff settlement.

As he walked between the lines of chalets, past the empty swimming pools that seemed to cover all Africa, he saw the Peugeot parked below one of the ports. Sitting with her easel was Leonora Sully, a tall man in a white suit beside her. At first Halliday failed to recognize him, although the man rose and waved to him. The outline of his head and high forehead was familiar, but the eyes seemed unrelated to the rest of his face. Then Halliday recognized Dr. Mallory and realized that, for the first time, he was seeing him without his sunglasses.

'Halliday . . . my dear chap.' Mallory stepped around the drained pool to greet him, adjusting the silk scarf in the neck

of his shirt. 'We thought you'd come one day ...' He turned to Leonora, who was smiling at Halliday. 'To tell the truth we were beginning to get a little worried about him, weren't we, Leonora?'

'Halliday ...' Leonora took his arm and steered him round to face the sun. 'What's happened - you're so pale!'

'He's been sleeping, Leonora. Can't you see that, my dear?' Mallory smiled down at Halliday. 'Columbine Sept Heures is beyond the dusk line now. Halliday, you have the face of a dreamer.'

Halliday nodded. 'It's good to leave the dusk, Leonora. The dreams weren't worth searching for.' When she looked away Halliday turned to Mallory. The doctor's eyes disturbed him. The white skin in the orbits seemed to isolate them, as if the level gaze was coming from a concealed face. Something warned him that the absence of the sunglasses marked a change in Mallory whose significance he had not yet grasped.

Avoiding the eyes, Halliday pointed to the empty easel. 'You're not painting, Leonora.'

'I don't need to, Halliday. You see ...' She turned to take Mallory's hand. 'We have our own dreams now. They come to us across the desert like jewelled birds ...'

Halliday watched them as they stood together. Then Mallory stepped forward, his white eyes like spectres. 'Halliday, of course it's good to see you ... you'd probably like to stay here—'

Halliday shook his head. 'I came for my car,' he said in a controlled voice. He pointed to the Peugeot. 'Can I take it?'

'My dear chap, naturally, But where are—' Mallory pointed warningly to the western horizon, where the sun burned in an immense pall. 'The west is on fire, you can't go there.'

Halliday began to walk toward the car. 'I'm going to the coast.' Over his shoulder, he added, 'Gabrielle Szabo is there.'

This time, as he fled toward the night, Halliday was thinking of the white house across the river, sinking into the last light of the desert. He followed the road that ran northeast from the refinery, and found a disused pontoon bridge that crossed the wadi. The distant spires of Columbine Sept Heures were touched by the last light of sunset.

The streets of the town were deserted, his own footsteps in

the sand already drowned by the wind. He went up to his suite in the hotel. Gabrielle Szabo's house stood isolated on the far shore. Holding one of the clocks, its hands turning slowly within the ormolu case, Halliday saw the chauffeur bring the Mercedes into the drive. A moment later Gabrielle Szabo appeared, a black wraith in the dusk, and the car set off toward the northeast.

Halliday walked around the paintings in the suite, gazing at their landscapes in the dim light. He gathered his clocks together and carried them onto the balcony, then hurled them down one by one onto the terrace below. Their shattered faces, the white dials like Mallory's eyes, looked up at him with unmoving hands.

Half a mile from Leptis Magna he could hear the sea washing on the beaches through the darkness, the onshore winds whipping at the crests of the dunes in the moonlight. The ruined columns of the Roman city rose beside the single tourist hotel that shut out the last rays of the sun. Halliday stopped the car by the hotel, and walked past the derelict kiosks at the outskirts of the town. The tall arcades of the forum loomed ahead, the rebuilt statues of Olympian deities standing on their pedestals above him.

Halliday climbed onto one of the arches, then scanned the dark avenues for any sign of the Mercedes. Uneager to venture into the centre of the town, he went back to his car, then entered the hotel and climbed to the roof.

By the sea, where the antique theatre had been dug from the dunes, he could see the white rectangle of the Mercedes parked on the bluff. Below the proscenium, on the flat semi-circle of the stage, the dark figure of Gabrielle Szabo moved to and fro among the shadows of the statues.

Watching her, and thinking of Delvaux's 'Echo', with its triplicated nymph walking naked among the classical pavilions of a midnight city, Halliday wondered whether he had fallen asleep on the warm concrete roof. Between his dreams and the ancient city below there seemed no boundary, and the moonlit phantoms of his mind moved freely between the inner and outer landscapes, as in turn the dark-eyed woman from the house by the drained river had crossed the frontiers of his psyche, bringing with her a final relief from time.

Leaving the hotel, Halliday followed the street through the empty town, and reached the rim of the amphitheatre. As he watched, Gabrielle Szabo came walking through the antique streets, the fleeting light between the columns illuminating her white face. Halliday moved down the stone steps to the stage, aware of the chauffeur watching him from the cliff beside the car. The woman moved toward Halliday, her hips swaying slowly from side to side.

Ten feet from him she stopped, her raised hands testing the darkness. Halliday stepped forward, doubting if she could see him at all behind the sunglasses she still wore. At the sound of his footsteps she flinched back, looking up toward the chauffeur, but Halliday took her hand.

'Miss Szabo. I saw you walking here.'

The woman held his hands in suddenly strong fingers. Behind the glasses her face was a white mask. 'Mr. Halliday—' She felt his wrists, as if relieved to see him. 'I thought you would come. Tell me, how long have you been here?'

'Weeks - or months, I can't remember. I dreamed of this city before I came to Africa. Miss Szabo, I used to see you walking here among these ruins.'

She nodded, taking his arm. Together they moved off among the columns. Between the shadowy pillars of the balustrade was the sea, the white caps of the waves rolling toward the beach.

'Gabrielle ... why are you here? Why did you come to Africa?'

She gathered the silk robe in one hand as they moved down a stairway to the terrace below. She leaned closely against Halliday, her fingers clasping his arm, walking so stiffly that Halliday wondered if she were drunk. 'Why? Perhaps to see the same dreams, it's possible.'

Halliday was about to speak when he noticed the footsteps of the chauffeur following them down the stairway. Looking around, and for one moment distracted from Gabrielle's swaying body against his own, he became aware of a pungent smell coming from the vent of one of the old Roman cloacas below them. The top of the brick-lined sewer had fallen in, and the basin was partly covered by the waves swilling in across the beach.

Halliday stopped. He tried to point below but the woman

was holding his wrist in a steel grip. 'Down there! Can you see?'

Pulling his hand away, he pointed to the basin of the sewer, where a dozen half-submerged forms lay heaped together. Bludgeoned by the sea and wet sand, the corpses were only recognizable by the back-and-forth movements of their arms and legs in the shifting water.

'For God's sake - Gabrielle, who are they?'

'Poor devils ...' Gabrielle Szabo turned away, as Halliday stared over the edge at the basin ten feet below. 'The evacuation - there were riots. They've been here for months.'

Halliday knelt down, wondering how long it would take the corpses - whether Arab or European he had no means of telling - to be swept out to sea. His dreams of Leptis Magna had not included these melancholy denizens of the sewers. Suddenly he shouted again.

'Months? Not that one!'

He pointed again to the body of a man in a white suit lying to one side farther up the sewer. His long legs were covered by the foam and water, but his chest and arms were exposed. Across the face was the silk scarf he had seen Mallory wearing at their last meeting.

'Mallory!' Halliday stood up, as the black-suited figure of the chauffeur stepped onto a ledge twenty feet above. Halliday went over to Gabrielle Szabo, who was standing by the step, apparently gazing out to sea. 'That's Dr. Mallory! He lived with me at Columbine Sept Heures! How did he - Gabrielle, you knew he was here!'

Halliday seized her hands, in his anger jerked her forward, knocking off her glasses. As she fell to her knees, scrambling helplessly for them, Halliday held her shoulders. 'Gabrielle! Gabrielle, you're—'

'Halliday!' Her head lowered, she held his fingers and pressed them into her orbits. 'Mallory, he did it - we knew he'd follow you here. He was my doctor once, I've waited for years ...'

Halliday pushed her away, his feet crushing the sunglasses on the floor. He looked down at the white-suited figure washed by the waves, wondering what nightmare was hidden behind the scarf over its face, and sprinted along the terrace past the auditorium, then raced away through the dark streets.

As he reached the Peugeot the black-suited chauffeur was only twenty yards behind. Halliday started the motor and swung the car away through the dust. In the rear mirror he saw the chauffeur stop and draw a pistol from his belt. As he fired the bullet shattered the windshield. Halliday swerved into one of the kiosks, then regained control and set off with his head down, the cold night air blowing fragments of frosted glass into his face.

Two miles from Leptis, when there was no sign of the Mercedes in pursuit, he stopped and knocked out the windshield. As he drove on westward the air grew warmer, the rising dawn lifting in front of him with its promise of light and time.

prisoner of the coral deep

I FOUND the shell at low tide, lying in a rock-pool near the cave, its huge mother-of-pearl spiral shining through the clear water like a Fabergé gem. During the storm I had taken shelter in the mouth of the cave, watching the grey waves hurl themselves toward me like exhausted saurians, and the shell lay at my feet almost as a token of the sea's regret.

The storm was still rumbling along the cliffs in the distance, and I was wary of leaving the cave. All morning I had been walking along this deserted stretch of the Dorset coast. I had entered a series of enclosed bays from which there were no pathways to the cliffs above. Quarried by the sea, the limestone bluffs were disturbed by continuous rock-slides, and the benches were littered by huge slabs of pockmarked stone. Almost certainly there would be further falls after the storm. I stepped cautiously from my shelter, peering up at the high cliffs. Even the wheeling gulls crying to each other seemed reluctant to alight on their crumbling cornices.

Below me, the seashell lay in its pool, apparently magnified by the lens of water. It was fully twelve inches long, the corrugated shell radiating into five huge spurs. A fossil gasteropod, which had once basked in the warm Cambrian seas five hundred million years earlier, it had presumably been torn loose by the waves from one of the limestone boulders.

Impressed by its size, I decided to take it home to my wife as a memento of my holiday – needing a complete change of scene after an unprecedentedly busy term at school, I had been packed off to the coast for a week. I stepped into the pool and