

## The Presence

### Chapter 16 – Human Monsters

**“She was right of course. No food, no water and soon the sun would turn the desert into an oven. They needed a miracle and Jerry doubted if any God, of any religion....Would waste a miracle on the Libyan Desert.”**

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Marsha Miller didn't have much time to scroll through social media, but she liked looking at the holiday pictures of friends and acquaintances. The ones who travelled as part of their job, always caught her eye. Always that look over the wing, as their plane landed somewhere hot, sunny and exotic. Lots of clean looking streets from over a thousand feet up, with not a cloud in sight, or the merest hint of fog. Sometimes there'd be a fantastic local landmark, like a well-known mountain.....Maybe even a smouldering volcano. Even London hadn't been too bad as her plane had taken off. The water in the nearby reservoirs had glinted in the early morning sunshine. Not that she'd seen much of London. Train stations could be right there, in the centre of town. Airports though.....For some reason they had to be miles away from the city they served. The water in the reservoirs had been pretty though.

“We're about to land at Manchester Ringway. It's raining, of course it is.”

Even whoever was on the microphone felt able to take the piss out of Manchester's weather. A female voice, she even chuckled before ending the announcement. Ringway wasn't like most airports and despite landing there many, many times; Marsha had never seen it on a dry, sunny day. Low cloud was an issue, as was fog of course. And as for torrential rain...Marsha was having trouble seeing the plane's wing, let alone the ground below them. Yes, landing at Ringway was different.

“The rain was supposed to let up today.” Said the woman next to her.

“The forecast always end up with that.” Said Marsha. “I suppose they think we need a little hope to get us through another wet day.”

The bump as the wheels hit the soggy tarmac was a surprise. There was nothing to see out of the window, until a guy with orange paddles was telling the pilot where to go. He looked drenched, of course he did. Strangely, it was nice to be back, in the city she now thought of as home.

“Do you live in Manchester ?” Asked the woman.

“Yes, I've been here for quite a while now.” Said Marsha.

There could be no mention of Eric; half the city hated him and the other half ? They didn't seem that keen on him either. The woman patted her hand, before getting her things out of the overhead locker.

“Don't worry.....It's bound to clear up by tomorrow.” Said the woman.

An obvious believer in the local weather forecast. If she was in Manchester for a while, she'd learn.

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About a mile from their camp to where there were stone blocks to hide behind. It didn't sound far, but Celia Margolin never wanted to walk a mile over rough ground again, ever. The backs of her legs ached and when they got to the temple there was nowhere comfortable to sit. Her backside parked on a rough stone block, she reconciled herself to two hours of watching people in uniforms, carry boxes out to their helicopters. It was hot too, with enough sun to burn her skin. She had sunblock,

but not enough to last for days of watching and waiting. There had been more gunfire and they hadn't seen any of the cops. There was no certainty, but it pointed at an obvious conclusion.....  
"They killed the cops." Said Jerry Zale. "Now they're packing and shifting the valuable finds."  
"The cameras the students were given are pretty good." Said Celia. "I take a couple of shots every time they come out carrying a box. I'd already recognise all of these guys in a line up. It begs the question though.....What do we do next?"

"Kevin is sending daily updates on that box of his." Said Jerry. "Henrike seems to think the cops will appear over the horizon, like the seventh cavalry."

"Has he got any replies on the Matrix?" Asked Celia.

"Confirmations that they know there's trouble here, but no promises of help."

Celia gave Jerry a knowing smile. The university would have given updates to the authorities in Tripoli. Yet for some reason a few hundred Libyan soldiers had failed to ride in to the rescue, or whatever they did. Someone big was after the artefacts in the Temple. Someone big enough to hire guys in helicopters and pay the police to look the other way.

"We should get out of here." Said Celia. "The soldiers must have spotted our camp. We're not a nuisance to them, so they're ignoring us. Don't shoot the foreigners; it upsets the people who might invest in Libya. Push them too far though.....We need to be on our way to Tripoli."

"I know you're right, but this is an incredible piece of news." Said Jerry. "Seriously, it's going to be huge.....The sort of piece that gets awards and saves crumbling careers."

Celia had to laugh; the crumbling career comment had been hers. He'd been drunk and talking about his past glories. She felt it was her duty to ground him when his ego threatened to take over the room.

"Awards don't mean much if we're dead." She muttered.

"Again.....I know you're right." Said Jerry. "Tonight we'll talk it over with Henrike and the others. If we can talk them into it, we'll get in the cars and head back to civilisation."

"What if they can't be talked into it?" She asked.

"Well.....We can hardly drive away and leave them.....Naomi can hardly walk."

"Jerry.....I know you and you're playing games." Said Celia. "I just hope you don't get us all killed."

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There are some ports and cities on the coast, that shout money when you see them. Nick had been to a few of them and remembered how Nassau in the Bahamas seemed to yell wealth at him. Sometimes it was a relative thing, the obvious wealth on a coast that didn't look that special. That was how it was with Antalya on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Nick Rees had been leaning on the rail, or sitting on a deck chair for a while, watching the Turkish coast go by. A quite ordinary coast; pretty in a rather dull kind of way. Lots of small hills, with the occasional small coastal village. All very green, all very like the calendar on the office wall somewhere. Then their container ship began to head towards Antalya.

"Wow, gateway to the Turkish Mediterranean." Said Drew. "I can see why they make such a fuss about it."

"I don't know how Beni arranged this, but I'm glad he did." Said Nick. "We can disembark and merge into the crowds. Pick up the car waiting for us somewhere, and....."

"We're off and away." Said Drew. "Are you sure Betsy will help us? We will officially be fugitives from the law by now."

Adie joined them and she too, looked impressed by the view of Antalya.

“Fugitives sounds rather exciting.” Said Adie. “Is this the Antalya we’re heading for ? So many large yachts.....It definitely looks like a playground for the rich and infamous.”

“Sadly, we’re just passing through.” Said Drew. “Get the car, make a few calls and.....Goodbye to Antalya.”

“We can come back of course.” Said Nick. “Once the book deal has gone through. I quite fancy a little pampering in a really nice hotel. Beni’s place was alright, but it is a bit basic.”

“Just get us home Nick.” Said Adie. “For now.....I simply want to see my son again.”

A launch approached, probably dropping off a local shipping pilot. The container vessel sounded a horn three times and Nick felt them speed up a little. Nothing on a ship was ever fast; they got to places by going along at a crawl, but never stopping. It might be another hour before they were actually walking on Turkish soil, but they were getting closer.

“Sorry, Adie.” Said Nick. “I get carried away with new places. Our first priority is getting back to London.....And getting you to Uxbridge and Silas. I can’t make promises for Betsy, but she knows people. I’m sure we’ll be in London in a day or two.”

James and Marwa joined them and everyone had a look of excitement on their faces, as they saw Antalya. It was sunny, but it was one of those places.....It would still scream money at you on a cold, rainy day. Tobruk had turned out to be far better than anticipated and Beni’s cook had produced some amazing food.....And a birthday cake for James. It was nice though, to see a large and affluent city, after living inside the old Russian truck. Nick hugged Drew as she leant on the rail.

“I will miss our truck.....But I can’t wait for a night in our own bed.” He said.

“Oh yes.....And seeing Suki again.” Said Drew. “I hope she’s been spoiled by everyone.”

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Henrike didn’t feel comfortable about how the meeting had gone. Celia had obviously wanted to get into the two surviving vehicles and head back to Tripoli. Jerry on the other hand, had obviously decided that whatever was going on at the temple, was too good a story to be abandoned. There was supposed to have been a vote, but it never happened. Jerry had said he could read the room, even if it was a tent. There had been quite a lot of laughter over that comment. Jerry again, he seemed to be making all the decision; he’d said the general mood was to stay where they were. Food was an issue of course and fresh water, though once again, Jerry made the decision. They were all staying at their temporary camp, which no longer felt that temporary. Celia had yelled at Jerry, calling him a manipulative bastard. Celia had run out of the tent, with Jerry running after her. It had been unsettling when it had happened and two hours later, it was still unsettling.....

“They have to come back.” Said Naomi. “There are no other cars and Kevin has both sets of keys. I mean.....They can’t walk back to Tripoli.”

In the back of the Jeep, their home away from home. Naomi still had a lot of trouble walking, but was getting better every day. Henrike had reached a decision, though he hadn’t asked her yet. No matter how it looked to the university, he wanted to carry on seeing her. Of course, he accepted that Naomi might well tell him to go forth and fornicate.

“We managed alright before they arrived.” Said Henrike. “If Jerry hadn’t been here, we’d have left by now. We’d probably be in a small town by now, enjoying a proper meal.”

“He does assume we’ll all do what he wants.” Said Naomi.

“To hell with it all.” Said Henrike. “Let’s grab a couple of blankets and go out onto the sand for a while. If we ignore the local bugs and nasties, I’m sure they’ll ignore us.”

Naomi knew what he meant; there was a certain look in her eyes. There was something about the dangers, that made sex on the open sands, a lot more exciting than in the Jeep. Plus, the sand was kinder to his knees.

“Be patient, it might take me a while to hobble that far.” Said Naomi.

“No, you don’t weigh much, I’ll carry you.” Said Henrike. “Up on my back, your arms round my neck.....We’ll be fine, but you get to hang onto the blankets.”

“You’re a crazy person....Move closer.”

Naomi wasn’t a waif, but she wasn’t that large either. She was chuckling and holding the blankets under her elbows, as she clung to him. No water, no first aid kit.....Nothing apart from themselves and raging lust.

“Hey.....Careful, don’t drop me.” Said Naomi.

“Stop wobbling then and I won’t.”

It was easier on the move. One foot in front of another and Naomi really wasn’t that heavy. Henrike stopped a good way from the camp, far enough to guarantee a little privacy. Enough of a distance for Naomi to be as vocal as she liked.

“Wait, I’ll kneel down.” Said Henrike.

They had a lamp, one of the small ones, no bigger than a domestic flashlight. They hadn’t told anyone where they were going though, another fairly basic ignoring of the rules. Naomi sort of rolled off him and for a few moments, they both looked up at the night sky.

“So clear.....You can see every star in the milky way.” Said Henrike.

You couldn’t really, but compared to the night sky in Europe, it really was amazing. Not just pollution in the air, there were other factors, like the glow from street lights. Henrike straightened the blankets, as Naomi went through all the constellations she could see.

“I don’t want this to end when we get back.” Said Naomi. “How do you feel ?”

“The same, but my current relationship status.....There are complications.” Said Henrike.

“I have complications.....Anyone old enough to screw has complications.” Said Naomi. “Are you willing to say fuck complications and give it a try ?”

“Yes, I am.”

The sex was good, despite Naomi’s bad leg. She either had a knack with one legged sex, or maybe legs didn’t matter that much, when you were horizontal ? A hot night, they must have both sweated out a pint of water, by the time they were lying next to one another; enjoying the endorphin powered afterglow.

“We should have brought water.” Said Naomi.

“No free hands left to carry it.”

Back to looking at the sky again and looking for satellites to go across the night sky. They moved quickly, but the occasional meteorite moved even quicker. They were both still naked and a little sweaty, when explosions filled the night with bright light and noise. For a moment, it was like being lit up by floodlights.

“Crap.....That came from the temple area.” Said Naomi.

Another explosion and the light seemed even brighter. The noise was louder, a detonation large enough to make the ground tremble. No need to work out which direction the noise was coming from. About a mile away, there was a red hot plume of gas and debris, rising up into the sky.

“They are.....Nick thought they might.” Said Henrike. “The bastards are blowing the temple apart. All that history.....Damned philistines. Monsters, human monsters.”

Naomi was dressing, which wasn't easy. He helped her as they both looked towards the light from the explosion. It had to be lighting the temple ruins up like day.

"No helicopter took off.....We'd have heard it." Said Naomi.

"Something weird is going on.....We'll take the Jeep and have a look."

"Jerry said we shouldn't risk the vehicles being damaged." Said Naomi.

"Personally.....I don't give a shit what Jerry thinks." Said Henrike. "We need to see the temple and see if any of the artefacts can be saved."

He carried Naomi and as they entered the camp, Kevin was there. He obviously knew where they'd been; there wasn't even the obvious question about where they'd been with blankets and a lamp. Maybe Kevin had been following them about quite a lot. Not that it really mattered, but it was a bit creepy.

"I brought night glasses, lamps and the assault rifle." Said Kevin. "I'm assuming we're going to the temple."

"Looks that way." Said Naomi.

Into the Jeep, after making sure they had water, the first aid kit and two of the pistols taken from the police at the ruins. Naomi took one of the guns and seemed to have forgotten all about Jerry and his instructions. Kevin was driving of course, driving a little too fast.

"Ease up, Kevin.....It's not that far and we need to get there in one piece." Said Henrike.

"Sorry.....It's just nice to be finally doing something." Said Kevin.

"Did Jerry and Celia come back to the camp?" Asked Naomi.

"No, haven't seen them all night." Said Kevin.

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The car turned out to be a truck. When Marwa thought about it, a truck was a sensible option. All of them could have squeezed into a large four door saloon. It would have been a tight fit though and then there were all their bags. In her mind she'd pictured them in a large and battered estate car, with everything strapped to a roof rack. Yes, the truck had seen better days, but far better than a car.....

"Where are we going?" Asked Marwa. "I know you told us, Nick. Humour me; it's been quite a week."

"A small airstrip near Serik." Said Nick. "The airstrip is legit, no dodgy drug runs, or so Betsy told me. The private jet is legit too. Betsy knows people and a few of them owe her favours. The owner of the jet is one of what she calls her top drawer clients. The only thing not legit is us."

"Will it take us all the way home?" Asked Drew.

"Eventually, after a few stops to refuel." Said Nick. "Not all the way to Heathrow of course, they're not keen on small planes mixing in with the large passenger jets. We'll be taken to an airstrip near Rochester, that specialises in parachute training for people with a death wish. Again.....All legit, the plane has landed there before."

"What happens if we get caught?" Asked Marwa.

"A bridge to be crossed if we get to it." Said Adie. "I'm happy with anything that gets me home fairly quickly."

"Do we know what type of private jet it is?" Asked James.

The first comment from James in a while. He was driving and seemed to be concentrating on a lot of paper maps. There were also hand written directions, from the man who'd given them the keys to the truck. There had been no fake papers though. It seemed there hadn't been enough time to get them prepared.

“No.” Said Nick. “The guy is loaded though.....It has to be something sleek and expensive.”

Any private jet sounded exciting to Marwa. She’d been on a few commercial airline trips from Tripoli airport, all linked to her life at the university and helping Louise. Private jets though.....They weren’t exactly ten a penny in the Tripoli neighbourhood where she lived, and she was a little nervous.

“Damn.....This guy’s writing is atrocious.” Said James.

“There.....I can see a windsock thing.” Said Adie, while pointing.

Marwa knew her local history. She also knew there were airstrips all over Europe, that had been built for various wars. Time had left them behind, to become flying clubs, or places where the wealthy could land in privacy. The airstrip at Serik was surrounded by old huts and looked like something left over from World War II. James parked them close to the jet, which was the only jet there. A few old single engine Robin trainers were parked up on an area of tarmac, but that was it.

“Wow.....That is quite an aircraft.” Said Drew. “Can we keep it ?”

“Now, if it was up to me, no problem.” Said Nick. “I can see Betsy getting a bit upset, if we did.”

“Alright, out of the truck.” Said James. “Quite a good drive, but we’ll never see it again.”

“Oh, I was getting used to it.” Said Marwa.

“Check you’ve got all your things.” Said Nick. “As James said, the truck stays here.”

The plane had crew, of course it did. Two men in uniform appeared, then a third. There was even a woman dressed as a very smart looking stewardess. They all came to look at the people borrowing their boss’s jet for a while. As Marwa carried two bags towards the plane, the stewardess grabbed one of them.

“Thank you.....Can I ask ? What sort of private plane is it ?” Asked Marwa.

“It’s a Gulfstream G800.....A very safe and comfortable aircraft.”

“Get you anywhere in the world.” Added a middle aged man, who might well have been their pilot.

Marwa had thought all their things would need to go in the cabin with them. There was a baggage hold though, and everyone helped get their bags safely stowed. Drew gave the truck a final look over, to make sure they hadn’t left anything behind. Then came the moment, when Nick shook hands with the middle aged guy. It seemed he was their main pilot, but there was a co-pilot too. Nick walked up the steps first, but they were all soon marvelling at the inside of the aircraft.

“Amazing.....Like a cut down passenger jet.” Said James.

“That’s the idea.....We’ve a better range than some holiday jets.” Said the stewardess.

Everyone found a seat, all grouped together, which wasn’t a surprise. They’d been through a lot and seen some strange things. They were also heading home without Travis. Nothing was expected of them during the flight, so Marwa leant back in her chair and let out a contented sigh. Of course Nick had to ask the question, it was the kind of thing he did.

“If the worst happens and the police grab us.” Said Nick. “I take it you have some kind of prearranged plan ?”

The co-pilot answered, though he did have the decency to look embarrassed.

“You overpowered us and forced us to take off for parts unknown.....That’s the gist of it.”

“Ahhhh.....A take me to Cuba type of thing.” Said Nick. “Fine and as I suspected. No need to get you guys into any trouble.”

Marwa would have preferred not to have known, but she was determined not to let it ruin her day.

After the plane had taken off and the stewardess appeared with drinks, she had to ask her own important question.

“Any food ?.....We didn’t get much of a breakfast.” Marwa said.

“Oh yes.....Food please.....I can feel my trousers getting loose on me.” Added James.

"The kitchen is fully stocked.....I'll bring you some menus." Said the stewardess.

A menu for breakfast....On a plane. Marwa was wondering if they'd all died somewhere and it was some kind of wealthy guy's idea of heaven.

"Someone order eggs and bacon for me." Said Marwa. "I'm just going to take a five minute nap."

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Still night, but the various fires were providing a lot of light. Not as light as day, but Naomi could see the burning helicopters and the plumes of fire rising out of the ruins. Kevin brought their Jeep to a halt, close enough to feel warmth from the flames.

"I didn't think whatever was in there, would let them do it." Said Kevin. "The temple has gone; nothing will be left in there."

"Maybe the thing in there killed the soldiers." Said Naomi. "I can't see the army blowing up their own helicopters."

Everyone got out of the car, with Henrike helping her to lean on the side of the Jeep. As Naomi raised her gun to cover the other two, she saw them.....The bodies.

"Look." Naomi said, pointing. "I can see at least six bodies, all in some sort of army uniforms. Something awful happened here, something terrible."

"I can see a body with a police badge on their shirt." Said Kevin.

It was a slaughterhouse that didn't make sense. Why destroy the helicopters if the soldiers were already dead ? Something inside the ruins made a rumbling noise and a few more flames reached up to the sky.

"We should go.....Right now." Said Kevin. "One last look for Jerry and Celia. No messing around, we then go straight back to Tripoli."

"Yes, if they're still not in the camp, we leave them here." Said Naomi.

Naomi had actually liked Jerry, even though he had piles of control issues. He'd gone though, apparently deserting them. That hurt Naomi, because she thought he'd quite liked her.

"There's one undamaged police truck." Said Henrike. "If that starts and has plenty of fuel, we can use that. Kevin can drive the Jeep, with Naomi and me in the cop truck. That means leaving Jerry and Celia, the car they arrived in."

"Perfect.....No one gets abandoned in the desert." Said Naomi. "I hadn't really wanted to leave them.....It's just that...."

"We're all under pressure.....I'll look over the police truck." Said Kevin.

It looked like a scene from a movie, a horror movie. Dead bodies everywhere, some burning in the flames. All the light set against the darkness of the Libyan desert at night. It felt as though nothing could be alive out there, but she still covered Kevin, as he moved towards the truck. It wasn't far away; he was soon opening the door. Kevin even waved a set of keys at them, to show they'd been in truck. Kevin vanished for a moment, as he got into the police vehicle.

"The truck is great news.....I trust it to get us to Tripoli." Said Henrike. "The Jeeps are alright for local roads in Tripoli. I just don't trust them on long journeys, over bad roads."

Kevin was leaning out of the truck's driver's side window.

"Plenty of fuel !" He shouted at them.

It all happened as though it was on TV, or at the movies. It looked so much like a scene from a film, that it didn't feel real. Even as a bullet blew apart Kevin's head, she was waiting for him to take a bow and get up again. The feeling of it all being unreal, probably helped her aim. Naomi would never have called herself a gun expert. She barely knew where the trigger was. She saw the injured cop

though, as he pointed his gun at Henrike. Naomi held her gun firmly and aimed at the centre of the cop's body, his torso.

"Fucker." She yelled.

Naomi fired three times and the cop fell over. Henrike ran over to the cop and knelt down next to him.

"Dead.....You got him." Shouted Henrike.

"Good." She yelled back.

Still a student, but she was congratulating herself on killing someone. That was shortly after wanting to leave Jerry and Celia to their fate in the hot Libyan desert. Naomi wanted to badly to go home, before she discovered more dark flaws in her own personality. Henrike gave her the gun that had belonged to the cop she'd just shot. Oh great, another damned gun.

"You're obviously better with these things than I am." Said Henrike. "Watch for trouble.....I'm going to move Kevin out of the truck."

"Are we taking him with us?" She asked.

"I'd like to, but in this climate.....It'll seem a very bad idea, very quickly. I'm afraid it's a shallow grave for Kevin, with some rubble over the top."

"So, we're still taking the truck?" Asked Naomi.

"Yes, it's better than the Jeep." Said Henrike. "Collect our things together.....I'll move the Matrix box when I get back. Oh, and tap in about Kevin.....Louise needs to know."

Naomi wanted to stop watching, as Henrike dragged away Kevin's body. She had to stay focused though, in case there were more cops still alive and dangerous. When Henrike went behind a pile of rubble, she began putting their things in bags. It actually felt good, to be packing to leave. The good feeling ended when she tapped Kevin's death into the box. There was the usual beep, as it confirmed the transmission had been received in Tripoli.

"Not that much will probably happen." She muttered. "But at least we've told them."

Large wing nuts held the Matrix box in place. Naomi undid them to make life easier for Henrike. He just needed to lift the box and carry it to the truck. After that, she resumed leaning on the side of the Jeep, with no less than two guns jammed down her jeans and one in her hand.

"Come on Henrike, Kevin only needs a shallow grave." She muttered.

Which made her feel bad again. It was the circumstances though, she didn't think she was a bitch back at the university; or at least she hoped she wasn't. The minutes kept ticking away and there was a moment when she wondered about Henrike not coming back. She might be able to drive the truck, but her leg still hurt like hell.

"You haven't heard a gunshot.....Don't be an arse, he's fine." She muttered at herself.

But Kevin had seemed fine, when he'd waved the keys to the truck at them. Kevin mixed with the locals, they called him Lawrence of Arabia.....Fuck, he was the last guy in the world she'd thought would die in the Libyan Desert. The anxiety grew, until there he was. Henrike was walking back towards her.

"I'm so relieved to see you.....I had some crazy thoughts in my head." She said.

Naomi hugged Henrike and was pleased when he hugged her back, quite hard.

"Sorry, the ground was hard." Said Henrike. "I found a spade among the debris, probably belonged to the cops. Just us now, Naomi.....Just you and me."

After taking the bags and then the Matrix box to the truck, it was her turn to be moved. Being carried on his back wasn't as much fun as it had been, but it was nice to be getting away from the burning ruins. There was a little of Kevin's blood still on the truck window though Henrike had wiped



away most of it. He helped her into the passenger seat and that was it, they were ready to leave. Henrike turned the ignition key.....Nothing happened.

“There is a plan B.....If it won’t start, we move everything back and use the Jeep.” He said.

The truck started on the second try. Very carefully, Henrike reversed the truck out of the debris and took it in away from the flames and the destroyed temple.

“We should have taken some pictures.” Said Naomi.

“Maybe, but we were officially just here to check if Nick and the others were alright.”

“Yes, Nick and Drew.....I hope they’re safe somewhere.” Said Naomi.

“Probably back in Europe by now.....At least I hope they are.” Said Henrike.

Henrike drove them back to their temporary camp, which definitely wasn’t somewhere Naomi had good feelings about. Nice sleeping with Henrike every night, but not enough water to wash properly and they were fast running out of food. It was definitely a goodbye and good riddance type of place. No more clambering about, her leg was quite painful. Naomi leant out of the truck window, with a gun in her hand. If her mother could have seen her.....She’d have freaked out. Henrike checked the tents and looked in the car Jerry and Celia had arrived in.

“No sign they’ve even been back here.” Said Henrike.

“I know we need the food and water, but we’ll need to leave them something.” Said Naomi.

“Easy to get lost in a large and largely empty desert.” Said Henrike. “You’re right though, we’ll leave them three days’ supply of water and a few tins. The car keys too, I found them on Kevin. He had a wallet too, which Louise will want.....His driving license is in it.”

“Can I see it ?”

“Sure.”

Odd to see Kevin’s driving licence, with the almost obligatory photograph that looked nothing like him. Short hair when he’d had it taken, which definitely hadn’t suited him. A mum somewhere would want the wallet back and she’d cherish the contents; even the receipt for twelve cans of high strength beer. Naomi handed the wallet back to Henrike.

“Alright, up front.....My leg really hurts.” Said Naomi. “I’d love to help you carry stuff about, but you’re on your own.”

“No problem.....Just stay alert. We’re not that far away from the ruins.”

Naomi kept the gun ready, but there was no attack by another cop, or a rampaging pack of wild canines. Quite quickly, their things were in the truck and.....It started first time. The Matrix machine was just behind her seat, so Naomi keyed in that they were leaving the ruins.

“Do I mention helicopters and dead soldiers ?” She asked.

“No, that’ll just confuse everything. We’ll tell Louise once we’re back.”

There was no reassuring beep. When Naomi looked, there was no reassuring green light either. She tried again and the super high tech, unbreakable Matrix box, was as dead as a dodo.

“Damn.....Looks like no more information for Louise.” Said Naomi.

“Must have been moving it out of the Jeep.” Said Henrike. “It probably needs a reset, or something like that. I have no idea how to do it. Never mind, we’ll soon be back in Tripoli.”

“Oops.....How do we explain arriving in a cop truck ?” Asked Naomi.

“We’ll say we found it at the ruins.....Which is the truth, sort of.”

The truck was comfortable, no feeling every bump in the road, as it had been in the Jeep. About half an hour later, after the sun had come up; Naomi settled back in the passenger seat and drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

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Jerry kept putting one foot in front of the other, but they didn't seem to be getting anywhere. It was a large desert though and everywhere looked pretty much the same as everywhere else. Light now, though they had tried finding their way in the dark, with just a flashlight.....

"You're the one who insisted he recognised two rocks and a dead tree, in the dark." Said Celia.

"Everything looks the same.....I'm not even sure where north is anymore." Said Jerry.

"Don't know where north is.....Hopeless, bloody hopeless." Muttered Celia.

"Hey, don't you dare blame me." Yelled Jerry. "You're the one who went running off into the night.....You didn't think to take a water flask with you.....Oh no, that would have been far too sensible."

Celia had a rock in her hands; she'd been playing with it for a while. For one dreadful moment, she brought her arm back and seemed to be about to throw it at him. The rock never came his way; she dropped it and carried on walking.

"We need to know where north is, the sea is to the north." Said Celia. "There's a trick to find north. You use where the sun is in the sky and a wristwatch. I remember it from school."

"Neither of us has a watch." Said Jerry.

"I know that!" Celia shouted.

It was the look of hate in her eyes. She'd always looked at him with affection, even if he was being an arsehole. Now there was just hate and coldness.....cold as ice in a desert. He risked her anger and held her hand. To his relief, she didn't snatch it away.

"It's just that.....Unless there's a miracle, we're going to die in this awful place." Said Celia.

She was right of course. No food, no water and soon the sun would turn the desert into an oven.

They needed a miracle and Jerry doubted if any God, of any religion....Would waste a miracle on the Libyan Desert.

"We need to keep going in one direction." Said Jerry. "Which means finding a landmark and walking towards it. Otherwise we'll end up going around in circles. I saw that on one of those survival programmes on late night TV. You can pick.....Choose a landmark."

There wasn't much to see, apart from miles of sand and rocks. There were a few stunted bushes, but they were all short and close to the ground. Celia had good eyes though, probably better than his.

"There.....Looks like a small hill in the distance." Said Celia.

"Alright, I can see something where you're pointing."

They walked and walked, and carried on walking. The day became hot; he'd heard that part of Libya could reach fifty degrees at that time of year, over a hundred and twenty Fahrenheit. Jerry noticed the edges of his eyes getting coated in some sort of gunge. Tempting to rub it away, but his hands were filthy. Celia still seemed to be able to see it though, the small hill they were heading for. At about what was probably midday, when the sun was overhead, they rested. Really more like collapsing on the sand and stones. There was no shelter, none at all. Jerry pulled his shirt up and over his head.

"Never thought I'd go like this." Said Jerry. "I thought I'd be shot dead in my eighties. A jealous husband of course, as he caught me climbing out of his wife's bedroom window."

"That's what I love about you, Jerry Zale.....Your cheerful attitude." Said Celia.

Her voice sounded different, he assumed his did too. Dry mouths, dry throats.....Dry every damned thing. They must have both slept for a while; the sun had shifted across the sky when he stood up. Everything ached and his shirt needed carefully pulling off his face. As it was, he felt a piece of skin come off with it.

"Crap.....I'm pulling bits off myself now." Said Jerry.

“Hey, stop messing about.....We have company.” Said Celia. “They weren’t there when we stopped, I’d swear to it.”

Jerry risked using a grubby finger, to wipe the bottom of his eyelids. A surprising amount of yellow gunge ended up on his finger. He could see them clearer though, the tents, the people and their camels. Not that far away either, though there was no guaranteeing they’d be friendly.

“Nomads, I read about them once.....An inflight magazine had something on them.” Said Jerry.

“Do you think they’ll help us ?” Asked Celia.

“Depends who they sided with in the various wars and uprisings.” Said Jerry. “Plus....Westerners aren’t exactly flavour of the month in some parts on Libya. Not that we have a lot of options.”

“Come on.....I’ll go first and smile a lot.” Said Celia.

“Maybe I can sell you for one of their camels and some water.”

She gave him a playful thump and then held his hand, as they walked towards the nomads. No one reacted to their approach, not even the camels. Good sign, bad sign ? Jerry wasn’t sure, but at least no one was aiming a weapon at them. There were a lot of AK47s hung over shoulders.

“We need Kevin.....He speaks the local language.” Said Celia.

“Just smile a lot and say water.....They’ll get the idea.”

Jerry had heard a lot of Arabic spoken and some of it had stuck in his mind. Water was a kind of Maa sound, he remembered. He’d done enough stories in the Middle East to know much more, but he wasn’t really a language person. About thirty feet from the tents; they were suddenly surrounded, though no one was waving a weapon at them. The crowd began to push them towards one particular tent.

“Well.....They seem friendly.” Said Celia.

“I think we’re about to meet the boss, their head guy.”

Lots of young men with a variety of blades attached to belts, but no one was threatening them. It was still quite daunting though, to be pushed towards one of the larger tents. A man came out to meet them, a middle aged and rather tubby man. The only fat person they’d seen, he had to be the headman. He looked at them, without saying a word.

“We became lost in the desert.” Said Celia. “We need help.....We need water.”

“We badly need your help.” Added Jerry.

The headman looked them over and had a whispered conversation with one of the young men. Jerry didn’t know what to do or say, it didn’t feel right to keep pestering them for help. Celia had sat on the floor without being asked, so he joined her. It had to have been a full hour after they’d arrived, when the headman smiled at them.

“We saw the explosions....Half of Libya will have seen them.” Said the headman. “Come in, you are most welcome. Refresh yourselves and rest. Then we will see about getting you back to your car. I am told it is still there and looks undamaged.”

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