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Zi'ib

As righteous heart with evil intrigue vies

The Book of Light

The sun sank low over the Sahara desert, turning the waters of the Nile into a rippling mirror of purple, gold and pink. From every mud-brick house in the small Sudanese village of Dar el Maarifa came the rhythmic *swish, swish* of stiff brooms brushing away the sand blown in by a dust storm. The storm had ridden the swell of the third stream of energy, appearing from nowhere to roll across the desert plains like a wave of brown mist. By dusk the dust had settled, enveloping everything in a layer of fine grit.

The village teacher, Sayeeda Shadia, lived with her son next to the school. Her house was as small and simple as all the others, but she had painted the front door blue and planted a purple bougainvillea beside it. The door opened and Zi'ib, a gangly boy of eleven, came out carrying a

bucket of water. He had a delicate face, thick crinkly curls and startling green eyes. His mother would explain to curious strangers that he had inherited them from his father, who must have had some foreign blood in him, Syrian or Turkish perhaps. To silence further gossip, she also said she was a widow, although she still prayed that one day her missing husband would return to her alive and well.

Zi'ib sluiced down the window shutters and stared up at the emerging stars, wondering how much longer they would stay in Dar el Maarifa. He and his mother had moved house so many times; it was almost as if she were afraid of staying in one place for too long. While neighbours, schools and homes had come and gone, the night sky remained one of the few constants in Zi'ib's life.

He knew the constellations had names, but he had always liked to trace his own pictures in the mass of shimmering dots. He stood in the gloom, gazing at his favourite image of a sword. Tonight it looked different, clearer somehow and speckled with bright stars he'd never noticed before. Below it something glowed on the horizon. It couldn't be the last glimmer of the sunset because it was moving towards him. The blob of light grew and separated into the beam of headlights, bumping fast over the rutted track. Squinting hard, he made out the shape of a truck full of men. He heard shouting. Then the sudden sickening judder of gunshots. Shadia gripped his shoulders and

pulled him into the house. Clumsy with fear, she slammed the door and turned the lock.

The truck swerved to a halt and the men leapt out. In a swirl of dust they jumped over walls, kicking at the shuttered doors. Zi'ib heard the frenzied bark of old Mama Fatma's dog, then another burst of gunfire. The dog fell silent but the screams began. Shadia pulled Zi'ib through the thin curtain dividing his bedroom from the living area.

"*Yumma,*" he whispered.

"Be quiet. Get down."

A khaki cap flashed past the window. Crouching low, they groped across the room. Shadia put her lips to her son's ear.

"I will find you. You must stay strong."

Quickly, she pushed him down behind the bed. A booted foot thudded against the front door.

"Hide, *Yumma,*" gasped Zi'ib, but there was nowhere for her to hide.

With a shuddering crack the door split from its hinges, a hand ripped back the curtain and a man burst into the bedroom, his eyes glittering above a sweat-soaked scarf. He swung his rifle, jabbing at the air. From the kitchen came the sound of smashing pots and splintering furniture. Zi'ib cowered beneath the bed, watching the raider's ugly black boots thunder across the floor, wishing he were a man. The rifle butt smashed into the framed photograph hanging on the wall. Zi'ib's fear shattered with the glass, releasing a surge of anger that flung him from his

hiding place. As he lurched forward his ears filtered out the terrible sounds and his eyes saw everything unfold in slow motion. He saw Shadia turn and cry out a warning, saw the gun barrel jerk towards him; then he tumbled into darkness.

An irresistible flow of energy was now sweeping across the curve of the earth from the lost cities of Sudan and the mountains of Shasta to the vanished forests of Thornham, coursing through the ruined remnants of a once-powerful grid, churning the fates of three green-eyed children in its pitiless wake.