

THE SECRET OF ABDU EL YEZDI

MARK HODDER

THE SECRET OF
ABDU EL YEZDI

A BURTON & SWINBURNE ADVENTURE



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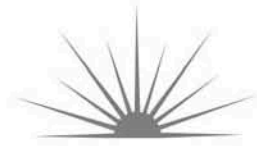
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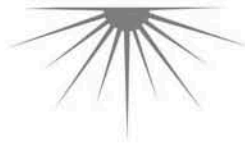
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Dedicated to

VENUS SPEEDWELL





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DISCLAIMER



Writing is a solitary business at the best of times, but when deadlines draw near, one is forced into prolonged seclusion. During these periods, on the infrequent occasions when I've emerged from my study, bearded, unwashed, and with a crazed glint in my eyes, my beautiful partner, Yolanda, has fed me and talked soothingly until the twitching has stopped. What small measure of sanity I still possess must be credited to her I give her my thanks and my love.

My gratitude, also, to Lou Anders and the Pyr team in the US, and Michael Rowley and the Del Rey team in the UK. Your faith in me and your continued support are hugely appreciated.

Many of the characters featured in this novel bear the same names as—and similar personalities and histories to—people who actually lived. However, as will quickly become apparent, the 1859 of this story is not the 1859 you'll discover in history books.

If a person whose life is well documented had been presented with completely different opportunities and challenges, would they have turned out the same? In *The Secret of Abdu El Yzdi*, the answer to that question is a resounding, "No!" Thus, though my characters are intended to evoke their famous counterparts, their portrayal is not in any way biographical. In an attempt to compensate for any disrespect I may have shown them, I've included brief factual information at the end of this book, which I hope will encourage my readers to explore the real histories of the truly remarkable and admirable men and women featured herein.

BURTON

"Unjust it were to bid the World be just
And blame her not: She ne'er was made for justice:
Take what she gives thee, leave all grief aside,
For now to fair and then to foul her lust is."

—*A THOUSAND NIGHTS AND A NIGHT,*

TRANSLATED BY SIR RICHARD FRANCIS BURTON

THE SUMMONING

"When one creates phantoms for oneself, one puts vampires into the world, and one must nourish these children of a voluntary nightmare with one's blood, one's life, one's intelligence, and one's reason, without ever satisfying them."

—ELIPHAZ LEVI, *AXIOM XI OF LA CLEF DES GRANDS MYSTERES*

Captain Richard Francis Burton leaned on the basin, looked into the mirror, and saw Captain Richard Francis Burton glowering back. He scowled into the black, smouldering eyes and snarled, "I'm sick of your meddling! I'll live by my own choices, not by yours, confound you!"

His tormentor's glare locked aggressively with his own.

At the periphery of Burton's vision, behind the devil that faced him, the cabin door opened and a slim young man stepped in. He was prematurely bald but sported a very long and bushy beard.

"You're awake!" the newcomer exclaimed, leaning his silver-topped walking cane against the wall.

Burton turned, but when he stopped the room didn't—it continued to spin—and the other jumped forward and took him by the elbows. "Steady on, old chap."

There was something rather repellent about the man's touch, but Burton was too weak to shake him off, so submitted meekly as he was guided to his bunk.

The visitor shook his head disapprovingly. "I don't know what you think you're doing. Sister Raghavendra will have your guts for garters. Back into bed with you, sir. You need rest and plenty of it. You're not out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot."

Burton managed to shrug free from the others's grip and slurred, "Did you see him? Why won't he leave me be?"

"To whom do you refer?"

"Him!" Burton shouted, flinging a hand toward the mirror and almost overbalancing. "Dogging my every step, the old fool! Interfering! Always interfering!"

The younger man chuckled—a sound that inexplicably sent cold prickles up Burton's spine. "It's merely your reflection, and you're hardly old; just worn out, that's all. The fevers have taken their toll, but I'm sure you'll regain your looks once you've shaken off the malaria. Now come, lie down, I'll read to you awhile."

Burton shook his head, his knees buckled, and he sat heavily "Reflection, be damned. If I ever meet the dog, I'll kick him all the way to Hades!"

The visitor gave a snort of amusement, and the odious nature of his presence finally registered in full. Burton looked up at him, his jumbled senses converging, bringing the man's penetrating blue eyes into focus, noting the wide and rather cruel-looking mouth and the polished, overdeveloped cranium.

Dangerous. The fellow is dangerous.

A tremor ignited in Burton's stomach and raced outward through his body, causing his question—"Who are you, anyway?"—to come out more as a teeth-rattling moan.

"Four times I've visited your room, Captain," the man replied, "and four times you've made that very same enquiryThe answer is as ever I am Laurence Oliphant, Lord Elgin's private secretary. He and I joined the ship at Aden for passage to London."

Burton frowned and struggled to clarify his thoughts. Memories eluded him. "Aden? We're not at Zanzibar?"

"No, we're not. The *Orpheus* departed Zanzibar two weeks ago. It spent five days at Aden, has just departed Cairo, and is currently en route to London via Vienna, where it will pick up the foreign secretary, Lord Stanley."

"What day is it?"

"Night, actually. Wednesday, the thirty-first of August. Tomorrow, your long expedition will finally be over. You'll be glad to get home, I expect. I understand you have a fiancée waiting for you."

Burton lifted his legs onto the bed, waited for Oliphant to arrange the pillows behind him, and lay back. His limbs jerked and his hands began to shake uncontrollably. He felt himself burning, sinking, disconnecting.

He could sense the eyes of the Other Burton upon him.

Go away. Go away. Leave me alone. I haven't time for you now. I have to watch this fellow. There's something about him. Something wrong.

Oliphant went to the basin, wetted a flannel, returned, placed it on Burton's forehead, and sat beside him. "You've been out of commission for nearly a month, but Sister Raghavendra says you're through the worst of it. She thinks the fever will break within the next few hours." He tapped his finger on Burton's shoulder. "Why do you do it, Captain? Why push yourself so hard? First in India, then your mission to Mecca, and now Africa—what drives you to such endeavours?"

Burton whispered, "The devil. He's inflicted upon me a mania for exploration."

"Ha! Well, this time Old Nick took you to the brink of death. You were lucky you had one of the Sisterhood of Noble Benevolence with you."

Sister Sadhvi Raghavendra. Her beautiful face blurred into Burton's memory then swam away.

"It wasn't luck," he murmured. "Is she aboard? I want to see her."

"She was here but half an hour ago. I'll call her back if you wish it."

Fragments. Broken recollections. Cascading water falling from the great lake—almost an inland sea—to begin its long journey to the Mediterranean. Standing on a hill overlooking it, his companion at his side.

Burton sucked in a deep, shuddering breath, feeling his eyes widen.

"John! My God! How is John?"

Oliphant looked puzzled. "John?"

"Lieutenant Speke."

"I'm afraid I don't know him. Half a mo! Do you mean the chap who was with you at Berbera back in 'fifty-five? The one who died?"

"Died?"

"I was in the Far East at the time, but if I remember the reports rightly, he took a spear meant for Lieutenant Stroyan. It pierced his heart and killed him outright. That was four years ago."

"Four years?" Burton whispered. "But Speke and I discovered the source of the Nile."

"The fever has you befuddled. As I say Speke copped it during your initial foray into Africa. It was you, William Stroyan, George Herne, and Sister Raghavendra who solved the puzzle of the Nile. You'll be remembered among the greatest of explorers. You've made history, sir."

The information fell between Burton and the Other Burton and they

fought over it. The Burton here, now—the *real* Burton, blast it!—knew the fact to be true. Lieutenant John Hanning Speke had been killed in 1855. The Other Burton disagreed.

That is not when he died.

It is. I was there. I saw it happen.

He died later.

No! He died defending Stroyan.

He sacrificed himself for you.

Get away from me! Leave me alone!

You need me, you dolt.

The argument melted into Burton's overheated blood and raged through his body. He felt his limbs thrashing and heard a wail forced out of him. "I've made history, you say? I've made history?" He started to laugh and couldn't stop. He didn't know why it was funny, but it was.

Funny and agonising and terrifying.

I've made history.

Dimly, he felt Oliphant rise from the bed and—through tear-blurred eyes—watched him cross to the speaking tube beside the bureau. The young man pulled the device free, blew into it, and put it to his ear. After a brief wait, he placed the tube back against his mouth. "This is Oliphant. Can you have Sister Raghavendra sent to Captain Burton's cabin? I think he's having a seizure." He clipped the tube back into its bracket, turned to face Burton, then raised his right hand and made an odd and complex gesture, as if writing a sigil in the air.

"You say you have a mania for exploration, Captain Burton, but to me, you appear to possess all the qualities of a fugitive."

Burton tried to respond but his vocalisation emerged as an incomprehensible bark. Flecks of foam sprayed from his mouth. His muscles spasmed.

"Perhaps," Oliphant continued, "you should consider the possibility that, when a man struggles to escape his fate, he is more likely to flee along the path that leads directly to it."

Burton's teeth chattered. The cabin skewed sideways, righted itself, and suddenly he could smell jasmine and Sister Raghavendra was there—tall and slim, with big brown eyes, lustrous black hair, and dusky skin burned almost black by the African sun. Eschewing—while she still could—the corsets, heavy dresses, and multiple petticoats of the civilised woman, she was wearing a simple, loose-fitting Indian smock.

She said, "Has he been at all lucid?"

Burton closed his eyes.

She's here. You're safe. You can sleep.

Oliphant's voice: "Barely. He was in the midst of one of his delusions. It's just as you told me. He appears to believe himself a divided identity—two persons, thwarting and opposing each other. Will he be all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Oliphant, he'll be fine. It's a normal reaction to the medicine I gave him. The stuff brings the malarial fever to a final crisis and burns it off with great rapidity. This will be his last attack. In an hour or two, he'll fall into a deep sleep. By the time we arrive in London, he'll be weak but fully recovered. Would you leave us, please? I'll sit with him for an hour or so."

"Certainly."

The creak of the cabin door opening.

The bunk shifting as Sadhvi sat on the edge of it.

Her hand removing the flannel from his forehead.

Oliphant whispering, "As the crow flies, Captain Burton. As the crow flies."

Oblivion.



Burton opened his eyes. He was alone. Thirst scratched at his throat but something else had yanked him from his sleep. He lay still and listened. The *Orpheus* thrummed beneath him, the noise of the airship's eight engines so familiar he now equated their background rumble with silence.

There was nothing else.

He pushed the sheet back, struggled out of bed— *Bismillah!* *So weak!*—and tottered over to the basin where he gulped water from a jug.

The mirror had been waiting. Hesitantly, he scrutinised the fever-ravaged countenance he saw in it: the sun-scorched but yellow-tinged skin, still marked with insect bites; the broad brow, beaded with sweat; the angular cheeks, the left furrowed by a long, deep scar; and the wildly overgrown forked beard that ill-concealed a forward-thrusting, aggressive jaw. He peered into the intense eyes.

My own. Just my own reflected.

He sighed, poured water into the basin, splashed it over his face, then closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. Employing a Sufi technique, he withdrew awareness from his trembling legs, from the ague that gnawed at his bones, from every sense but the auditory.

A few minutes passed before it impinged upon his consciousness again, but—yes, there it was, extremely faint, a distant voice, chanting.

Chanting? Aboard the *Orpheus*?

He gave the mirror a second glance, muttered an imprecation, then crossed to a Saratoga trunk, opened its lid, lifted out the top tray and retrieved a small bottle from one of the inner compartments.

The label read: *Saltzmann's Tincture*.

Five years ago, when an inexplicable impulse had led him to first purchase the cure-all from a pharmacist named Mr. Shudders, his good friend and personal physician, John Steinhaueser, had warned him off the stuff. Its ingredients were a mystery, but the doctor was certain cocaine was principal among them. Burton wasn't so sure. He knew well the effects of cocaine. Saltzmann's offered something entirely different. It imparted the exhilarating sense that one's life was ripe with endless options, as if all the possible consequences of actions taken were unveiled.

"Richard," Steinhaueser had said, "it's as insidious as opium and almost as addictive. You don't know what it might be costing you. What if it permanently damages your senses? Avoid. Avoid at all cost."

But Saltzmann's Tincture had cured Burton of the various ailments he'd brought back from India, saved him from blindness during his pilgrimage to Mecca, kept malaria at bay throughout his ill-fated penetration of Berbera, and had—despite Sister Raghavendra's seconding of Steinhaueser's opinion—sustained him while he led the search for the source of the Nile. For sure, in the final days of the expedition, he'd succumbed to the fever that was currently burning through his veins, but it wasn't half as bad as those experienced by the members of the Royal Geographical Society who scorned Saltzmann's and relied, instead, upon quinine. Livingstone, for example, was very vocal in his opposition to it and suffered as a consequence. In his most recent dispatch, sent from a village near the headwaters of the Congo and received at Zanzibar four years ago, Livingstone had reported himself "terribly knocked up" and predicted that he'd never see civilisation again. *If only I had my faith to sustain me*, he'd written, *but the terrible things I have witnessed in these wicked lands have stripped it from me. I am no better than a beast*. He hadn't been heard from since, and was now presumed dead.

Saltzmann's. If Livingstone had taken Saltzmann's, he'd have maintained his health and seen a way out of whatever predicament he was in.

Burton broke the bottle's seal, popped out the cork, hesitated a moment, then drank half of the clear, syrupy contents. Moments later, a delicious warmth chased the ache from his joints.

He turned and lurched across the room to the door, lifted his *jubbah*—the loose robe he'd worn during his pilgrimage—down from a hook, wrapped it around himself, then pushed his feet into Arabian slippers.

A walking cane caught his eye. It was leaning against the wall. Its silver grip had been fashioned into the shape of a panther's head. He picked it up and realised it concealed a blade, which he drew and examined: an extremely well-balanced rapier.

Sheathing the weapon and using it for support, the explorer opened the door and stepped out into the passageway beyond, finding it warmly illuminated by bracket-mounted oil lamps. His cabin was on the lower of the *Orpheus's* two decks, in the middle of the mostly unoccupied rear passenger section. William Stroyan's was a little farther along, closer to the stern observation room. He hobbled toward it. The corridor wavered around him like a mirage, and for a moment, he thought himself trekking across African savannah. He shook off the delusion and whispered, "Fool. You can barely stay upright. Why can't you just leave it be?"

He came to Stroyan's cabin and found its door standing partially open.

"Bill?"

No reply.

He rapped his knuckles against it.

"I say! Stroyan?"

Nothing.

He pushed the door open and entered. The lieutenant's bed was unmade, the room empty and lit only by starlight glimmering through the porthole.

Burton noticed his friend's pocket watch on the bedside table. He picked it up and angled its face to the light from the passage. Eight minutes to midnight.

Perhaps Stroyan was having trouble sleeping and had left this quiet area of the vessel to join the crew on the upper deck.

No. The bedsheets. The lieutenant is as neat as they come. Army training. He'd never leave his bedding twisted and trailing off the bunk like that.

And—

Burton grunted, took a box of lucifers from the table, lit one, and applied the spitting, sulphurous flame to a lamp, which he then lowered over the thing he'd noticed on the floor.

A pillow, darkly stained.

Blood.

He straightened, looked around again, saw the speaking tube, crossed

to it, whistled into the mouthpiece, then put it to his ear and waited for a response.

A tinny voice said, "Yes, Lieutenant? What can I do for you?"

It was Doctor Quaint, the ship's steward and surgeon.

"It's not Stroyan, Doctor. It's Burton."

"Good Lord! I thought you were incapacitated."

"Not quite. Do you know where Stroyan is?"

"I haven't seen him since dinner, sir."

"I think someone struck him on the head and dragged him from his bed. Would you have the captain come down here, please?"

"Struck? Bed? Are you—?"

"I'm not delirious, I can assure you. Will you—"

"The captain. I'll tell him at once, sir."

"Thank you."

As he returned the speaking tube to its housing, the muted chanting touched his senses again. He cocked his head and listened. It was louder now, a single voice, generally low and rhythmic but occasionally increasing in volume, as if impassioned and unable to fully contain itself.

Curiosity got the better of him, turned him around, and drew him back out into the passage. His balance was off and he stumbled along as if drunk, but pushed himself onward, spurred by a growing impatience with his own weakness and an almost vicious determination to conquer it and discover the origin of the mysterious sounds.

As he passed the passenger cabin doors, each summoned a splintered recollection, as if they opened onto memories rather than empty chambers.

Number 35: Lieutenant George Herne. Like Burton, down with fever. He'd been left at Zanzibar, where, when he recovered, he'd be taking over as the island's new consul. Burton would miss him. Herne was a good sort. A little stolid and unimaginative, perhaps, but loyal. Unflappable.

Number 36: Gordon Champion. The airship's chief rigger. Dead. He'd crawled out along one of the engine pylons to investigate the inexplicable power failure that had immobilised the vessel just north of Africa's Central Lakes. He'd lost his footing. The slightest of misjudgments and—snap!—gone. That's how quickly, easily, and apparently randomly a life could be extinguished.

Number 37: John Hanning Speke. A beetle had crawled into his ear and he'd permanently deafened himself while trying to extract it with hot wax and a penknife.

What?

No.

There was no door 37.

That last never happened.

Burton reeled as a wave of dizziness hit him. He slapped a hand against the wall and rested for a moment. Why did he keep thinking about Speke? He'd hardly known the man.

This was a mistake. He should get back to bed. He was beginning to hallucinate again. He could see Speke's face as clear as day, the lieutenant's pale blue right eye contrasting starkly with the dark lens of his mechanical left.

Except Speke never had a mechanical left eye.

What is happening to me?

A voice pulled him back into reality. He looked up. The double doors to the observation deck were just ahead. The chanting was coming from behind them. It had just risen in pitch.

He wiped sweat from his eyes, closed them, and concentrated on the sweet tingle of the Saltzmann's Tincture as it oozed honey-like through his arteries. He felt it climbing his neck and easing into the back of his skull.

I've made history.

He would be accepted; offered an official position; hopefully like Herne, a consulship. Damascus. He could marry Isabel and settle there; start his translation of *A Thousand Nights and a Night*. No one would again accuse him of being "un-English." No one would dare to call him "Blackguard Burton" or "Ruffian Dick." His years of exclusion and exile were over.

He tottered forward, holding tightly to the swordstick.

The chanting had greater clarity now. A man, repeating the same phrase over and over. Burton was an accomplished linguist, fluent in nearly thirty languages, but the incantation was utterly unfamiliar; a pulsating jumble of outlandish sounds and syllables, unfathomable, even to him.

He placed his left hand on one of the doorknobs, became aware of a pungent odour, paused, then twisted and pushed.

The door swung open. The explorer took two steps forward and stopped.

Laurence Oliphant halted in mid-recitation. His eyes met Burton's. He was standing in the middle of a pentagram painted on the floor. Clouds of foul-smelling smoke billowed from small brass censers positioned at its points. William Stroyan, obviously dazed and with blood dripping from a wound on his forehead, was kneeling at Oliphant's feet, facing away from him and toward Burton. Oliphant was gripping the lieutenant's hair and holding a large curved knife to his throat.

He sneered and slid the blade sideways.

Burton gave a cry of horror as blood spurted and his friend collapsed to the deck.

Oliphant raised his arms into the air. His eyes blazed triumphantly. "It is done! The way is open! I await thy coming, Master! I await thy coming! Thou shalt endure until the end!"

Barely aware of his own actions, Burton lifted the swordstick and drew the blade.

"That's my cane," Oliphant said.

The statement, so mundane amid such extraordinary circumstances, strengthened Burton's growing conviction that he was caught up in a fever-fuelled fantasy. He levelled the weapon at Oliphant—its tip shook wildly—and quickly glanced around, hardly comprehending what he saw. The walls of the observation room—three of glass; the fourth, at his back, of wood panels—were painted all over with squares, subdivided, each division containing a sequence of numbers. Beyond the glass, in the clear night sky, curtains of multicoloured light were materialising, shifting and folding, blocking the stars, and fast making the night as bright as day.

"Your cane?" Burton mumbled.

A horrible bubbling diverted his attention back to Stroyan. He saw the lieutenant's life gutter and depart.

Burton's eyes snapped up to Oliphant, who held out a hand and said, "I'll have it, if you please. It is bespoke. The only one of its kind. I had it fashioned in memory of a white panther I once kept as a pet. Marvellous creature. Don't you admire the single-mindedness of the predator, Captain?"

Uttering an inarticulate yell, Burton hurled himself forward, but his left knee gave way and his charge instantly became an uncoordinated floundering. He stabbed at Oliphant's shoulder, intending a disabling wound, but his opponent slashed his knife upward and deflected the rapier, sending Burton even more off-kilter. The two men collided and crashed to the floor. They grappled, Oliphant's weapon tangling in the explorer's *jubbah*, Burton dropping the sword and seeking a stranglehold.

Oliphant cried out, "Get off me! It's too late! It's him you should worry about now. He knows who you are, Burton. He'll come for you! He'll come for you!"

Burton punched him hard on the left ear, then, as the knife came free of the cloth, caught the man's wrist and strained to prevent the weapon from being thrust into his chest.

Who does he mean? Who's coming for me?

Without loosening his grip, Burton jerked his arms to the side and gouged his elbow into the other's eye.

Too fragile for this. Too damned fragile.

Oliphant twisted. The knife sliced through cloth and scraped across Burton's ribs. The explorer yelped, rolled over until he was on top of his foe, then slammed his forehead into the man's face, hearing the back of the other's skull clunk loudly on the deck. Lord Elgin's secretary went limp. Burton pushed himself up, sat on Oliphant's stomach, and with all the strength remaining to him, sent his fist crashing across the man's jaw. His opponent became still.

There. That'll keep you quiet, you bastard.

Falling to the side, he flopped onto his back and blacked out.

The distant coughing of lions.

The soothing songs of his bearers as the safari settled for the night.

The jungle, as red as blood.

Red?

The Other Burton's voice: *Parallel all things are; yet many of these are askew; you are certainly I; but certainly I am not you.*

"Burton! Captain Burton! Captain Burton!"

He opened his eyes and saw Nathaniel Lawless looking down at him. The airship captain's eyes were of the palest grey, his teeth remarkably straight and white, his snowy beard tightly clipped. Second Officer Wordsworth Pryce and Doctor Quaint were standing to either side of their commander.

Burton moistened his lips with his tongue. He said, "The sky."

"I know," Lawless responded. "It's the aurora borealis. But this bright and this far south? In all my days, I've never seen the like. Are you all right?" He stretched down a hand and helped the explorer to his feet.

"Comparatively speaking, yes."

"You're covered in blood."

"Most of it is William's. I have a scratch across the ribs, nothing more."

Doctor Quaint interjected, "Let me see it."

"Later, Doctor."

Burton turned and saw that rigger Alexander Priestly and engineer James Bolling—both big, beefy men—were holding the unconscious Laurence Oliphant upright.

Lawless asked, "He killed Stroyan?"

"He did."

"Why? And what are all these scribbles on the floor and walls?"

"It was some sort of ritual. A summoning, I think. William was the sacrifice."

"Summoning? Summoning of what? From where?"

"I haven't a notion."

Burton picked up the rapier and its sheath, slid the one into the other, then supported himself on the cane and waited for his head to clear. The Saltzmann's was causing a ringing in his ears and had put a strange glow around everything he saw. Or was that caused by the rippling illumination outside?

He took a deep breath, blinked, and addressed the second officer. "Pryce, would you mind fetching my notebook from the bureau in my quarters? I'd like to make a record of these diagrams and numbers."

Pryce gave a nod and departed.

Lawless jerked a thumb toward Oliphant. "I suppose I should lock this lunatic in one of the cabins."

Burton slipped his hand into his *jubbah* and gingerly touched the laceration running down his left side. His fingertips slid through warm wetness. He winced, and nodded. "Strap him down onto the bed. Make sure he can't move. We'll give him to the police when we reach London. I'll have a word with Lord Elgin."

"I can do that," Lawless objected. "You should go back to bed. You look sick as a dog—your skin is jaundiced."

"I'm over the worst of it, Captain. The excitement appears to have jolted me back to my senses. I'd rather see Elgin myself, if you don't mind."

"As you wish."

A couple of minutes later, Pryce returned and handed over Burton's notebook. Oliphant was hustled away. Quaint bandaged the explorer's wound then summoned a couple of crewmembers and helped them carry William Stroyan's corpse off to the ship's surgery.

Burton pushed to the back of his mind the misery he felt at his friend's death. He sketched. Each wall, he noted, had been divided into a seven-by-seven grid, the outer squares of which were densely filled with numbers. The next squares in—five by five—contained fewer numerals. They surrounded three by three, in each of which only four-figure numbers were painted.

Burton couldn't work it out, but he felt sure some sort of mathematical formula was in operation, which led to what he guessed was the "sum" in the central square of each wall. Behind him, on the wood panelling, this final

number was ten; on the wall to his left, eight; on the wall in front, one thousand; and on the right-hand wall, nine hundred.

He was aware of Lawless looking over his shoulder until the diagrams were copied, then the captain crossed the deck to one of the glass walls and stood beside it, gazing out at the sky. "You surely don't expect me to believe he magicked up the aurora?"

Burton shook his head. "He referred to someone he called his 'master' As for the lights, perhaps Oliphant somehow knew they were coming and timed his ritual to coincide with them."

Lawless ran his fingernails through his beard. Over the course of the past year, he and Burton had become firm friends, but the airship captain still observed the proprieties and nearly always called the explorer by his rank. Now, though, he let that formality slip.

"Damnation, Richard! After all we've been through, I wanted to get us home quick sharp! Instead, we had to lay over in Zanzibar until Herne's position was confirmed, wait in Aden for Elgin, and now bloody Oliphant goes batty just as we're about to land in Vienna. I swear, if our new passengers demand yet another delay because of this, I'll get off the confounded ship and walk home."

"Passengers?" Burton asked. "Who's with Lord Stanley?"

"Only His Royal bloody Highness Prince Albert."

Burton's eyebrows went up.

"I know," Lawless said. "Quite a surprise, eh? I was informed less than an hour ago. Disraeli obviously considers the *Orpheus*—as the flagship of the fleet—the most suitable vessel to escort the prince home, no matter that we've been in Africa for over a year and are all sick and exhausted." He pulled out his chronometer and clicked open its lid. "We'll be landing in fifty minutes but our precious cargo won't come aboard until daylight, so I suggest you get some more sleep. You look done in."

Burton nodded. "I am. But when Elgin shows his face in the morning, send someone to wake me."

"Righto." Lawless glanced around at the floor and walls then out at the rainbow colours that shimmered from horizon to horizon. "Hell and damnation!"