

THE 23 CLUB

by Edward Flaherty

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Beta 03 Edition¹

This book is a fictional landscape novella.

History, ...history always is, at best, like this story, ...a chiaroscuro...

¹ Beta 03, completed August 2013, includes a reformatting of endnotes into page notes, an addition of two episodes as part of the consolidation of characters and plot, a partial reinstatement of the detailed table of contents and proofreading corrections.

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EPISODE 1: DESERTIFICATION

T. E. Lawrence, was once asked,
'What is it, Major Lawrence, that attracts you to the desert?'
'It is clean, he answered. I like it, because it is clean.'

1.1: Prologue

In late Fall 2009, **via Skype**:

Theuns van der Walt, speaking from the **United Arab Emirates**, pushed:

Look, Chalmers, I've got a world class destination resort in the Empty Quarter--and I'm in trouble. It's going bad! I need you down here! You're one of the best--you've got to fix this for me--you've got to come down here!

Erik Chalmers, speaking from **Switzerland**, replied:

Listen to me, Theuns, I'm out of the game. I'm retired. I've had enough of these last minute mashups. And this project, this project...it just has too much noise.

Theuns van der Walt, with aggravation, pleaded:

What do you need, Chalmers? Money, autonomy? Just tell me, I'll arrange it for you.

1.2: Berner Alps

Madge looked content, as the bright red funicular climbed slowly and steadily up a steep slope in the heart of Switzerland. Riding in that funicular, Madge would in the next twelve minutes, rise over a thousand meters into the Berner Alps, in the Jungfrau Region of the Bern Canton in Switzerland. Her view early in May--exhilarating, heart-pounding!

On her way home from grocery shopping, Madge sat comfortably on well fitted, well upholstered seats. She appreciated the details, noticed them without effort. The funicular functioned with fundamental, actually exceptional convenience. The design details breathed with the landscape. Looking out UV protected, polarized glass windows, she had a rapturous, panoramic view, more than she could ever absorb.

Sitting beside her on the seat were two shopping bags. In one bag, stuffed on top of a couple kilos of new potatoes, she had a bunch of the season's first crop of local chard, its white stems and huge green leaves boisterously pushing out. Her second shopping bag, filled with odds and ends, also had fresh green leaves spilling over its top, the smaller, strappish leaves of just picked *bärlauch*, bear garlic, *Allium ursinum*, a native plant, whose strap like leaf is used as a wild garlic flavoring when picked as early spring growth, common in germanic Switzerland. She enjoyed these market trips and especially, the fresh local produce.

Looking out the funicular window, she absorbed herself in the landscape changes. During her twelve minute ride, she could see the season change from a mature floriferous spring down in the valley market, to the remnants of winter with just the earliest hints of spring up at her home.

While doing her shopping in the valley, she had reveled in the glory of these longer spring days. The plants absolutely sang, in the warmer sunshine, the moist soil. The crocus had already past. The forsythia were just about by. The daffodils and early tulips were in bloom. Saucer magnolia buds had just started to reveal their satiny promise.

Spring could not be constrained. Pleached horse chestnut trees, their leaf buds protruding, thick, rigid, straining to burst, expressing droplets of spring moisture--apple trees, young leaves still tender, their light-hearted pink and white flower buds, just beginning to dance--and deciduous forests, on the south facing slopes, at the edge of town, their trees, their just emerged leaves, exuding palpable energy, shimmering with translucent chartreuse.

If there ever was an elixir of life, it could be imbibed from that strangely intoxicating aroma of newly mown spring grass. And today, in each small front yard, the residents had been cutting that spring grass--yielding that elixir--that elixir that slows down and seemingly stops time--that elixir that enters by the nose, and captivates head, heart and mind--and Madge, she inhaled deeply and with satisfaction.

When she looked closely at the cut lawns, she discovered small, natural bouquets of delicate violets, dainty white daisy clusters and patches of baby primroses, creamy white, buttery yellow--all these wild, little, mixed clumpings popping up everywhere. And the people who cut their lawns, they appreciated these wild flowers too, cutting carefully around them, leaving them to their life of natural beauty.

At the edge of the village, she could see the cows already in their spring pastures. The cows were well taken care of through all stages of their lives--

their mountain synergy with humans had a practical balance. As the cows nibbled the fresh green--even ebullient pastures, the happy sounds of their bells gave Madge a healthy joy.

Through the funicular window, she saw a panorama of sharp mountain peaks, snow covered, gray granite, a jagged four thousand meters high. The powerful, mid-afternoon spring sun warmed their cold granite faces. The sun's brightness, energized them--their sweeping surfaces of drifted snow, twinkling with pinpoint reflections--their massive glacier noses, throbbing with electrical blue white refracted translucencies--breathtaking--absolutely breathtaking, the entire landscape.

There was still more. Behind and above the mountains, on a background of deep, dazzling clear blue sky were scattered, but heavy, full cumulonimbus clouds--every shade from charcoal gray to blinding white--puffy, swelling with moisture. In front of the granite peaks and lower in the middle ground, were row after row of mountain ridges, some already in shade, sawtooth silhouetted by their covering of black coniferous forests. Amongst those black sawtooths, and between those ridges and the gray granite peaks--hanging halfway up their slopes--hovered, in endlessly evolving transitions, appearing and disappearing, horizontal threads of gray mist, and thin horizontal bands of very low dark gray stratocumulus clouds, clinging to vertical faces, clinging to ridge lines.

Standing out here and there in the upper middle ground were sheer granite cliffs. Over these cliffs, off the higher mid mountain plateaus, waterfalls streamed, falling hundreds of meters--and each waterfall in this afternoon sun, like a stream of diamonds, sparkled ever so brightly. Such an unimaginable wealth of water, plants, fertile soil--landscape richness beyond words, stupendous in spring, breathtaking every day of the year--but now, today, Madge's personal thoughts, consumed her.

1.3: Madge

After decades of living and working, often on the edges of nowhere, in places sparse with life, meager with resources--after decades trailing her husband all around North Africa and the Middle East, Madge was happy to have finally retired to this quiet, beautiful mountain region.

Madge and Erik now lived with all modern conveniences--a civilized mountain life style, dependable water, sanitary, power--and connectivity, both in digital communications, and also in transportation--and walkable--with an especially stunning landscape viewed from a distance or, with a magnifying glass. Life flourished everywhere.

Why did her husband have to even think about another pressurized assignment in the uncertainty, the barrenness, the intense heat and the awkward humidity of the Arabian Peninsula?

There is no way I am going, she thought. In fact, there is no way he is going. Enough is enough!

Getting out of the funicular, she went to the adjacent bike shelter. She arranged her shopping into the two panniers on her bike, and began the level, three kilometer ride home. Riding the hardened path through the forest, she could hear the birdsong--crossing small creeks, she could hear bubbling, tinkling, rushing sounds, of the seasonal snow melt. The temperature was around 5°C and riding the bike built just enough body heat for a balanced, exhilarating feeling--filling her lungs with this mountain air--each breath was rejuvenation.

But inside, she still worried. Why does he have to go again--we worked hard, we undertook a lot of austerities, for this retirement. These mountains have been our inspiration, our recovery destination for decades. Now we live here, and their healing magic is as strong as ever.

Her heart started to ache with the thoughts. She would have to let this all out with him. He had come from a family of high blood pressure; and even though he was physically active in his work, the tensions of his work undermined his health. It was year after year in the tropical sun, outside in more than 50°C. His skin showed all the symptoms of cancer ready to bloom. The thoughts alone nearly overwhelmed her.

In the last year, he had lost much of his excess weight walking the mountains; and his skin was finally starting to lighten, to get back to normal. Just let it be, she thought, no need to go back down there again.

As she reached a narrow gravel path, on the right, winding uphill to her home, she got off her bike, and walked it, the last one hundred meters. Their cottage was at 1,500 meters above sea level, and facing north east--still way too early for the vernal alpine flowers. She looked at the promise of crocus and snowbells, poking their green heads through the melting snow. She also saw, the smallest shoots of spring green grass, just starting to work their way through last year's dormant clumps of tufted, cold shocked, yellow brown grass.

She parked her bike under the overhang of their cottage, gathered up her shopping bags and just before she went inside, took a deep breath. Inside, she put her groceries on the kitchen sink, and called to Erik.

1.4: The Cottage

Warm and welcoming, Erik and Madge's cottage was sturdy, and protective. It was in traditional local alpine style, built of spruce, with a solid concrete basement storage, an airy attic storage, and wide roof overhangs. Though small by Berner farm standards, the 150 square meters, on a single floor, with four rooms: a living room, two bedrooms and a study, were comfortably adequate, for Madge and Erik. The living room and study looked across the deep valley to the water falls and snow covered mountains, just as Madge had seen while riding the funicular.

Erik was online doing research in the study. He came out to greet Madge. He was aware of her worries about another assignment. He hugged her. He really loved the smell of her body, and especially her hair, tousled as it was from the, fresh mountain breezes. He was foolish to think about another assignment; but...

She felt his warmth. She smelled his hair, and his body, and remembered the first time--so many times--that essence of attraction had survived through decades. She was on the verge of tears. Then, crushed by fear, crushed by waves of uncertainty, she felt her tears well up, then spill down her cheeks. She backed away and erupted.

"Why do you even think about going down there again? Have you forgotten the impetuosity of the clients? Have you forgotten the churlish hubris...the bad mannered consultants...the lying contractors?"

"Have you forgotten the food imported from thousands of miles away? Have you forgotten the poorly maintained refrigerated trucks...and stores?"

Erik had sensed this was coming.

She continued, "Have you forgotten the fraudulent labels on packaged goods and foods? Have you forgotten pirated everything?" Then, taking her eyes from Erik, she paused and looked out over the Berner landscape.

She turned and looked at him again. "And don't even try to tempt me to come with you," she continued, "I have had my fill of hole in the ground toilets... standing in urine...stool marks on doors, on floors. I have had my fill of red-spit city sidewalks and walls. I have had my fill of hot and sweaty 24/7 days...and my fill of air conditioning that just does not ever work right."

Erik listened.

“And your health...your father started with high blood pressure medication at forty, your grandmother took high blood pressure pills all her life, why gamble again? Can I be any clearer? What is money? Why, why go? Why even think about it?!!! That place drains the life right out of you!”

Erik sighed, empathized--her points were all valid.

They had been ‘retired’ only a bit more than a year. His health had stabilized, his aerobic condition was very good now. But the challenge of a singularly unique project, had been put in front of him. It had started his fire. He never took the easy way. He took the challenge in order to succeed. And she had followed him all their life.

He spoke, “How many times have I done this successfully before? It would be for no more than six months. We’ll put a nice tidy sum away. We’ll be in contact via iChat, and maybe we can dovetail a few things. Besides, Madge, I still have that fire in my belly; and this is a special project.”

She was still consumed by doubt, and worry.

He put his arms around her, kissed her on the cheek, hugged and held her tightly, heart to heart, then suggested, “Let’s talk later, ok?”

She sighed and agreed. Their house became uneasily silent.

Madge had dedicated over forty years in marriage to Erik. She was ‘old school’. She was intensely independent, and also in love, a love which meant damn near unconditional service to him.

Erik used the income from his work to provide all the little, and, sometimes the very big things that brought to her everyday activities, certain material pleasures, and an overall satisfying transcendental pleasure. And she, in their decades of expatriate relocations, she kept their whole house, their finances, their whole life, running smoothly. Words alone can not share the essence of the subtleties essential to the longevity of their marriage. But together they mellowed. Together they enjoyed. Together they suffered.

1.5: Erik Chalmers, Landscape Architect

Erik Chalmers, an expatriate American landscape architect, had made a specialist career as a fixer--a fixer of complex, high profile projects, in difficult foreign locations, where both financial and esthetic targets were critical.

Called by his colleagues, simply, Chalmers, he was a dedicated international professional, who took seriously, his technical skills and ethical responsibilities. His work was in real estate development and facilities management, most often covering design, construction, operations and maintenance--he worked across multiple disciplines, on very large projects, quite often in the Arabian Peninsula.

His professional faults were few. One was that he rode the fence, that is, he worked in shades of gray. If he did his work in black and white, he could never align, the diverse multi-cultural nuances necessary to achieve the project goals.

The danger with shades of gray was, some day, someone might conclude he was on the wrong side of the fence. But, the way Chalmers saw it, as a foreign consultant in the Middle East, he was always a target, his neck was always on the line. As long as he could maintain, his impeccable professional ethics, and technical credibility, he lived with it. It was the price of working at the highest level.

A Midwesterner by birth and education, and in his early sixties, he was average in appearance--stood an average five foot ten--weighed an average 175 pounds. With full head of graying hair, slightly receding at the forehead, Chalmers was clean shaven--and, despite his health history, still looked 'young' for his age.

His family was grown. He was a grandfather.

He had tendencies toward, personal austerity and practical fitness. Otherwise, his presence in a group was not noteworthy. Curious about astrology, he was a water sign, which suited him well in this work. That meant he took the shape of whichever vessel in which he found himself. He worked with whichever group of people the project dictated, and he adapted accordingly.

He knew his work, and he learned people. He looked at team building, on these very large, complex, multicultural and multidisciplinary projects, as a sort of performance art, that only succeeded if the result was an elegant expression of landscape garden beauty, and, successfully opened on time.

After Madge went to the kitchen. Erik, went back to his research.

1.6: Empty Quarter

Erik's new project was in the Empty Quarter, the realm of the Bedouin, the Bedu, desert edge dwellers. The project was specifically, on the southeastern edge of the Liwa Oasis, in the United Arab Emirates (the UAE). The Empty Quarter, Rub al Khali in Arabic, was a huge sand desert in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. And the edges of the Rub al Khali, had for millennia been the shipping and cultural links between tropical Asia and tropical Africa. The edges of the Rub al Khali, the Empty Quarter, were anything but empty.

Even though he had worked in the UAE before, Chalmers Googled Empty Quarter.

The Empty Quarter stretched over 800,000 square kilometers, almost the entire southern half of the Arabian Peninsula. Only the Empty Quarter's easternmost 10% was in the UAE. And, the UAE were seven individual Emirates, the largest of which was the Abu Dhabi Emirate.

Deep within the Abu Dhabi Emirate was the Liwa Oasis, a long and thin, quasi connected series of dune valleys. According to Antara bin Shaddad, the Liwa Oasis had been, since before *Jahiliyah*, the coming of Islam, the only dependable source of water and, the eastern gate to the Empty Quarter. Antara bin Shaddad was one of seven respected poets, who have been considered primary Empty Quarter references. All seven poets concur the people of this region have always been burdened with a scarcity of water and a scarcity of fertile soil. The Liwa Oasis has been the shelter for those who have survived.

The Empty Quarter, with summer temperatures daily above 50°C, straddled the Tropic of Cancer. And this was the geographic context, and focus, for the new, five star hospitality project that was in trouble.

In his research, Chalmers uncovered some current references, some recent press articles from Abu Dhabi, regarding their attempts to generate their own system of green building and, developmental sustainability. A process to be known as Estidama, would yield a Pearl rating system, that would be applied to all projects. He hoped these new administrative layers would not be overlain on this new project. On the already tight deadline, it would be a guaranteed schedule breaker.

More intriguing, however, as Chalmers found in his research, were the ancient history references recalling past civilizations, stretching back before the beginning of written history. The Empty Quarter was filled with mysteries of lost, but not forgotten, cities, regions, cultures--bearing unusual names, Sheeba, Dhofar, Hadramaut, Shisur, Ubar. He read about unique geographical and

challenging artifact clues, stretching beyond the Empty Quarter, across the entire Arabian Peninsula. Examine the existing ancient buildings of Petra, of Medain Saleh, and their Nabatean culture--and, one could truly thirst, for what may have been buried, in the eternally, shifting, sands, the *rimal*, of the Rub al Khali.

These were, at the very least, the romantic mysteries, that had captured, the rare, Western explorers--writers like Sir Richard Francis Burton, St John Philby, John Lewis Burckhardt and Bertram Thomas. These brave men had all been allured to search the forbidding, the mysterious--to seek--to uncover the unknown, the treasures, the fortunes, the landscapes...

Access to the Empty Quarter had always been rare; but the people, the sailors and the traders, from the shores of the Indian Sub Continent to the shores of East Africa knew of it, because their dhows, called, small port to small port, along the southern Arabian Peninsula coast--making spice route connections. But no one made it to the Empty Quarter interior, except the tribes, the *Bedu* tribes, the Rashid, the Bait Kathir--few of them ever went, as far, as the Liwa Oasis, and never was it recorded in written histories.

In the 1950s, Wilfred Thesiger, on camels with the *Bedu*, crossed the Empty Quarter a couple times, right in the Abu Dhabi, Oman, Liwa Oasis region. He wrote much about the landscape and how the *Bedu* read it. Knowledge in reading the landscape, meant the ability to find water; and, that meant survival.

This was the way of life in the sands of the Rub al Khali. The coming of rain brought celebration. The coming of strangers brought fear, defense and possible death. It was an overwhelming, a testing, a debilitating life. For security, people bred within their trusted and dependable, within their extended families.

The fear, the sun, the heat, the sand, the dust, and on the coast, the humidity made life acrid--a sort of crippling languidity, leaving people only with dreams, to capture the relief of a cool breeze. They lived desert life in semi-consciousness, with all bodily functions shrunk to a minimum. All human shelter materials had two common features, shade and flow through ventilation, both to mitigate the endless environmental oppression by sun, heat, sand, dust, humidity.

For months at a time, eighteen hours a day, and more, the ambient air temperature was well above human body temperature. Bad weather was not a thunderstorm, it was a sandstorm. This life was cursed; yet it bred, among the best, a special strength.

Madge called, “Erik, come on for dinner. The fresh chard and new potatoes, have cooked up very nicely.”

Chalmers closed up his computer. He had sand in his shoes, and the first five star hotel in the Empty Quarter was the challenge. A singular door of opportunity beckoned him. He could not say no. He trusted Madge would understand. She always had.

1.7: Arabia Felix

Chalmers knew the Arabian Peninsula was both felix and non-felix. He knew it was a complex blend of cultures, a complex blur of tolerance from its coastal edges to fundamentalist protectionism in its isolated, internal centers. On this Empty Quarter project in Abu Dhabi, he would be working through all that blur, all the time.

To help keep his focus, he summarized some key natural and cultural geographic features, and concluded, there is no Arabia felix, without the Rub Al Khali, the world's largest sand desert. Straddling the Tropic of Cancer, it has always been, and still is, for humans, an enigma--throughout millennia, a massive natural and cultural enigma.

Chalmers' maps, demonstrating the natural and cultural geography, are provided in [Appendix 3, Chalmers' Maps of Arabia](#).

EPISODE 2: IT'S 2AM

Somewhere, in a lonely hotel room, there is a guy, starting to realize that,
eternal fate has turned its back on him...
--George Kooymans

2.1: Dubai Arrival

Long distance international jet travel had never bothered Chalmers.

He thought, I arrive, I go to work. When the day is finished, I go to bed. It works out. No problem normally.

This time it was different. Chalmers was awkwardly unsettled.

He was on the 23rd floor, in one of Dubai's ubiquitous five star hotels along Jumeirah Beach Road in New Dubai. He was sleeping. At 2AM, he was awakened by what sounded like lots of heavy furniture being moved around on the floor immediately above--big time. He called the front desk--they said they'd check--the incessant noise continued another fifteen minutes. He called the front desk again--the noise continued. Half hour later, it still continued. This time he reached the Duty Manager at the front desk.

By then it was 3AM and the Duty Manager apologized that young members of the ruling family from another Emirate had just moved in to party in the Presidential Suite--if he'd like, they could prepare another room for him--right, Chalmers thought, with a smile, a dose of Western cynicism, and his innate pragmatism--he knew this drill. Foreign guest disturbed by young Royalty--foreign guest relocates--there was no other way if he wanted any more sleep.

So he agreed, and they moved him far away, down at the other end of the hall, two floors lower. He grabbed his things and after a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing with the hotel staff at 4AM, he put his head down again. This time it was quiet; but, he couldn't sleep.

2.2: Kismet

Chalmers was strangely ruffled. More than this last couple hours, it had been the last twenty four hours that were now too vivid, almost visceral in his head.

His thoughts drifted back--the blood in the streets--Jean-Claude--Bahrain--Ashura²--his thoughts drifted back as he recalled yesterday about mid-day...

On this trip to the UAE, he had had to make an overnight stopover in Bahrain. He did not think much of it, an extra overnight. He had not checked the Hegira³ calendar. It was the Day of Ali. He had read about this special Shiite day; but, he had never seen it, and had no reason to think about it until he was at the hotel breakfast buffet that morning and bumped into an old friend, Jean-Claude Thibaut, who, on his way from Papua New Guinea, coincidentally was also stopping over in Bahrain.

Chalmers had first met him nearly twenty years ago, while they were both speakers at a national conference, sponsored by the American Society of Landscape Architects. They shared an educational background in Brussels, a landscape fondness for the Alps, and a fundamental agreement on the importance of integrating ethnobotanical cultural roots into contemporary landscape design.

When Chalmers explained he was on the way to the UAE to fix a project in the Empty Quarter, Jean-Claude told him about related research he had done there in the past five years. For both, this was a welcome coincidence. Jean-Claude adjusted his schedule; and they agreed to meet up in the next week to visit the Empty Quarter together and compare notes.

Jean-Claude Thibaut, a forty nine year old Belgian, was a confirmed bachelor who found his pleasures in the 'hair-shirt' explorations of cultures, of marginal groups just outside the edge of mainstream society--people still in contact with the land, with the old ways, Bedu, Berbers, Calusa fisherfolk descendants, true Gypsies, etc.

He examined human relationships with plants, through landscape, language, music, life...he was a very broad scale, ethnobotanist. He did not write for publication, did not have a PhD; but, he did maintain extensive multimedia digital archives, all collected first-hand...stories...songs...movies...images...and plant related artifacts...amulets...charms...

² Ashura, on the tenth day in the moon delineated Muslim calendar Hegira month of Mohaarram, is a day of mourning for Shia Muslims commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, also known as the Day of Ali.

³ Hegira calendar is the moon delineated Muslim calendar which is calculated in years following their Prophet Mohammed's departure from Mecca to Medina in 622AD.

Born into a wealthy entrepreneurial Belgian family, he took birth in the Belgian Congo where he spent the early years of his childhood. He was a polyglot graduate of international schools in Brussels and Gstaad. Following formal education at the University of London, he had travelled and visited all major botanical institutions in Africa and South America, gathering ethnobotanical information before his first post with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Ultimately, he became a director there. He had since retired to focus full-time on his personal research activities.

At five foot eleven and 165 pounds, he looked popularly slender and athletically lean. He had a self-effacing presence, and a manner of dress and hygiene uniquely making him as at home meeting and greeting in a five star Monte Carlo resort, as in a *majlis* tent on the edge of the Empty Quarter. He was not shy about sharing the realities of the groups he studied--‘over the edge’ would be the polite way to describe his first hand experience of the unusual interactions he shared regarding old, almost forgotten ways of human interaction with plants in the landscape.

Chalmers and Jean-Claude were friends, though their clatteringly different approaches to the landscape often belied that friendship.

2.3: Day of Ali

Jean-Claude mentioned the Day of Ali to Chalmers, suggesting they make a trip into town before noon to see as he called it, the ‘parade’.

Jean-Claude explained, “Bahrain is a country, whose population is dominated by Shia, who are ruled by a Sunni family. It’s the only Arabian Peninsula country with those demographics. Today is Ashura, the Day of Ali, the Shia holiday commemorating the death of Ali, whom they believe should have carried on Islam after the Prophet Mohammed. For Muslims, Shia Muslims, it’s the oldest case regarding a people being ‘hard-done-by’. The entire history of Shia versus Sunni friction comes from this one, bifurcated root.”

Chalmers said, “I always appreciate your cultural interests. They give me broad insights from which to solve my specific site problems; but this time, I think this is too far off my focus.”

“What do you mean? Listen, this is an urban landscape issue par excellence. And, Shia? You can’t escape their presence and influence anywhere in this region! You can’t back out of this one! What do you say?”

“I can’t miss my Dubai flight this afternoon.”

"Always hard to convince, aren't you? Listen, in the Muharraq section of Manama on this commemoration day all the shops are closed, all the people stay inside, all windows and doors are shuttered for the Ashura parade."

"A parade?" Chalmers squirmed. He remembered how many times before Jean-Claude tried to take him to the 'dark side'. Then he said, "I am not really convinced. I've heard about these flagellation events before. Don't forget, I am an American and parades to me include Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York, The Tournament of Roses Parade on New Years Day in Pasadena, and if there is an 'odd' parade, it is the Mummers Parade in Philadelphia. Really, I don't want to get into this Ali thing. Can't we just watch it on TV, or something?"

Jean-Claude ignored Chalmers' concerns and after they finished breakfast, emphasized, "C'mon, you've got to see this. It is a landscape event, both sensual and essential. One of these days this event will be big tourism in the West, come with me and we will see it first. But it is strange because the people in the parade become en-tranced, and kafirs, non-Muslims, are sometimes targeted, with horrendous result. Hey, aren't you always talking about an animated public realm? I'll show you public realm. None of that political correctness here. You in?"

"Ok, ok, but you've got to promise to get me to the airport on time, ok?"

"Don't worry, Chalmers. You can take your things, and put them in the trunk of my rental car. Immediately afterwards, I'll drop you at the airport with plenty of time to spare."

2.4: Ashura Flashback

Jean-Claude, he knew the town. They parked the rental car a couple blocks away from the route and gradually worked their way closer through the Muharraq streets--old, narrow, labyrinthine. The weather was overcast, without even the slightest breeze--warm, humid, foggy.

No shops were open. It all looked like an abandoned, almost derelict movie set. Nobody was out except the two of them, in the gray, stifling, unkempt atmosphere of the Muharraq medina.

Chalmers felt like he was being suffocated, blanketed by the hot, heavy, thick air--air, rife with sickly medina bacteria--rife with bacteria that had been

breeding for centuries on these sunless streets--in the creeping mildew and mold--on the filthy walls.

Then he started to hear and smell simultaneously what he could not yet see. He heard the rhythmic chanting of men in numbers. Then he heard the rhythmic pounding, flesh on flesh, in unison, in numbers. Then he recognized a stank smell in the air. That ferric smell could be none other than fresh blood.

Chalmers and Jean-Claude moved closer to the sounds--the smell became worse. They came to an acute corner, the chanting so loud that they could hear nothing else. They peered around the corner and saw their first group, maybe thirty to forty guys in 'the zone', glazed eyes, rhythmic chanting, marching and with their fists, pounding themselves on their chests--all in sync, driven, completely driven--Chalmers didn't know--driven by some strange force!? All auras were disturbed--out of balance. Fear was palpable, personified, gripping, it flowed, it spread, over Chalmers' body. Seeing it was not like reading about it.

In an attempt to calm himself, he tried to recall the Mevlana Sufi mystic trance dancing he'd seen years ago in Istanbul and Konya; but what he was seeing now was without the refinement, without the subtle and elegant Mevlana dervish music and dance. This was brute force trance.

The next group arrived. Some were bare back, some were black t-shirted. All were bloody, splattered everywhere, blood dripping down their backs and soaking their trousers. Their eyes were dazed. Their eyes were tranced. Powerful chanting, pushy, aggressive marching in coarse, raw, rhythmic sync, this group had more than fleshy fist thumping on chest--they had the mechanical flagellation kit, the *zanjils*, some call these *zanjils*, cat o' nine tails.

Each man, and this was a 'men-only' event, had two *zanjils*, each with steel grip, one firmly held in each hand. At the end of the grip were a number of chains, six to nine, maybe thirty to forty centimeters long with obviously sharp piecing pieces attached to the ends. While grasping the *zanjil* steel grips, they vigorously thumped their chests with their fists, pounding first the right and then pounding the left, all in rhythm, all in sync, and, with each thump, the chains whipped over their shoulders--the sharp edges, the sharp tips ripped into their backs, already flailed with numerous freshly flowing bloody cuts. These men were in another world. And that world excluded Chalmers and Jean-Claude.

Well hidden, peering around the corner, Chalmers and Jean-Claude secretly watched them pass by--then two or three more *zanjil* flagellating groups passed by in sequence, each with unique chants, each with unique marching steps, all soaked in blood from their freshly opened *zanjil* wounds. It was all too much.

Chalmers was overwhelmed by the sickly smell, the sight, the whole depressing aura. He had to leave. He had to get fresh air into his lungs--he pulled Jean-Claude by the arm. Jean-Claude didn't move. Chalmers tugged again, this time with growing nausea and impatience. Jean-Claude turned--looked at him, knew; and they stealthily slipped away, back to their car. What had he seen--Muharraq awash, awash with the overwhelming letting, of human blood...his stomach turned...violently...

2.5: The Fixer

Chalmers now found it impossible to get back to sleep, with that smell of an old, suffocating city--saturated with fresh, human blood--permeating his mind, his memories and even, it still seemed--his very nostrils. In his Dubai hotel room, late that very same night, Chalmers had these images and fresh memories in his head. Back he was, in the Middle East, a place where the politically correct slogans of multiculturalism, so much a part of the Western world, especially the USA, were replaced by a real time miasma of in your face cultural shocks.

It's part of his work. Chalmers carried on, as always.

He gave up trying to sleep, the Ashura memories were just too strong. It was 5AM. He got up, showered and ate breakfast at 6. Then he prepared for his first Empty Quarter Project meeting.

What did Chalmers really do as a fixer?

He worked in a rarely defined, but critical gap--the gap between the air-conditioned carpet world of the planners, of the designers--and the oppressive, 50°C sweaty world of the people who actually build those very large and complex iconic projects in the oil rich Middle East.

The gold ring? Get them built and beautiful, so that they can begin the return on investment on opening day as scheduled--his most noteworthy, example of success being, Atlantis the Palm Dubai, a 1,500 room resort destination and huge water park, with its A-level international celebrity 'Hollywood to Bollywood' opening media event--all coming off as scheduled, and profitable, every month since.

Chalmers' specialty was external finishes. These were the things of the first impression, that must look good, the magnets that 'wow' people from their first view, and then, on through the front door. The stuff has to be beautiful, fresh, healthy, seductive, and breathtaking! If it is not, then he won't work again.

Some developers plan for this. Others do not. For the developers, who do not plan, it is a real-time anarchic mash-up, rupturing cash and resources; and, Chalmers, he gets called in at the last minute, with panic all around.

From his first Skype conversation with Theuns van der Walt, Chalmers knew this Empty Quarter job would be one FUBAR mash-up.

And Chalmers knew--every day on this project would be as Cole Porter wrote:

The world has gone mad today
And good's bad today,
And black's white today,
And day's night today...

But now, God knows,
Anything goes!

EPISODE 3: SPIKE LOUNGE

Zack de la Rocha, aptly described the mood of these jobs, when he wrote:
We don't need the key, we'll break in

3.1: Emirates Golf Club

Chalmers had become accustomed to the Middle East proclivity to copy and paste Western sport and business cultural paradigms--such was the Emirates Golf Club. That same morning, Chalmers was to meet at the Emirates Golf Club, the person, who had originally contacted him on Skype, Theuns van der Walt.

Theuns van der Walt worked for the project development company, Cultural Tourism Futures (CTF), and his title was, Sponsor. His company held the money and political power, behind every part of this US\$400 million Empty Quarter project. As Sponsor, Theuns van der Walt was the key operations person wielding the power and money.

In the old days, the Sponsor would have been called a Project Manager, but with today's obsession to use the most modern and popular management process jargon from the West, he was called, Sponsor. The Sponsor would brief Chalmers regarding the essential details of the project's key players, the schedule, and the problems.

3.2: The Taxi

Dubai taxis were late model Camrys, impeccably clean inside and out, drivers in pressed trousers and, pressed dress shirts with epaulettes and ties. The taxis were metered, and regularly checked--all very neat, clean and dependable.

Chalmers would take a taxi to get to the Emirates Golf Club. At the hotel porte-cochere, the bell boy called a taxi from the waiting rank. Chalmers climbed in and requested, "Emirates Golf Club, please."

The driver said, "Welcome!" And they were off. Before long, they were driving along Sheik Zayed Road, the main limited access freeway in Dubai, running close to and parallel to the coast. It is the main connector between Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

His driving was smooth and controlled, no tailgating, no nervous braking, no maniacal lane changing, no speeding.

He asked, “You American?”

Chalmers said, “Yeah, how'd you know?”

He said, “Accent,” and immediately continued, “you know Smokey and Bandit?”

Chalmers thought, “*Smokey and the Bandit*...Burt Reynolds...early 1980s...”

Before Chalmers could answer, the driver continued, “My handle, PakiBandit 1. I am Pakistan. I save money this work, to buy back home truck.”

Chalmers smiled, then chuckled, remembering Pakistan's long favored status with the United States. He then, in his own type of Pidgin English, asked, “In Pakistan driving school, is there rule to beep horn, every time you start driving, every time you change lanes?”

With pride, PakiBandit 1 said, “No, that is India. Pakistan learn driving, like Smokey and Bandit.”

Chalmers chuckled softly, about the inherent contradictions between, safe driving techniques, compared to those of Smokey and the Bandit, then he lost track of the conversation. He had become hypnotized, by the recently opened, futuristic Dubai monorail, with trains riding high along the edges of Sheik Zayed Road. They were sleek, blue, driverless, digital trains, with a Japanese bullet train profile. They moved smoothly and effortlessly, from one elevated, gleaming metallic, space station pod in the sky, to the next.

Whether they would ever significantly reduce road congestion, hardly made a difference, because now, the monorail emanated that optimistic Dubai buzz for the future. Even post-2008, it was a sensual buzz. It was in the air, it was live, Chalmers could feel it. Most cosmopolitan people could feel it.

Chalmers observed the ‘to let’, and ‘for lease’ signs on all the sleek, new, glass and steel buildings. Those signs did not noise-cancel the buzz. Rather, they promised that the free market, in this hustling trading port, will be bargained to reality, and continue its 21st century growth, its buzz.

3.3: Entry Experience

As an American businessman, Chalmers was always early. He prided himself on that, and used the time to learn his way around new places. The Emirates

Golf Club was close by, right in the heart of New Dubai. Chalmers looked forward to this trip to the club. He planned to arrive early.

Chalmers recognized the landscaped main entry to the Emirates Golf Club, to be much like any 'high-end' gated community golf course built in the last fifteen years in places like southern Florida, southern California. It was nicely done, with its fancy gate house, uniformed security, then long and winding entry road. The winding road with its successive vistas, intrigued him. It was an engaging rhythm, an engaging sequence of landscape experiences.

Chalmers absorbed, what he called, a classic belly dance experience of landscape...veils covering, then gracefully falling away for a brief glimpse, then covering again...so that he hankered for that view. It was a strong design, well executed...broad spreading, coarse textured, shade trees, making dark tunnels over the entry road...while dense, large, coarse textured shrubs forbid the view along the sides...then, in the final bend of a curve...dark to light...all opening to bright, dazzling vistas, over the sensuously rolling, gently manicured lawns, the fairways. Chalmers was teased and manipulated by this landscape design...of tension...then relief...then tension again...it was a real tease.

When the taxi dropped him at the porte cochere, the covered open air entry to protect guests as they moved from their car to the main entry, the last veils were removed, and the climax opened in front of him.

He saw multi-trunk trees, bundled together in a thick grove, making full bloom umbrellas of voluptuous reds, oranges and yellows...these were *Delonix regia* and *Peltophorum peltatum*, softly nestled, on the shoulders, of the porte cochere.

Beneath this well-pruned, high canopied overstory, was a richly layered understory. From the edge of the pavement, Chalmers saw a gently rolling hummock, of variously sized, young, *Cycas revoluta*. They took his eyes up to the base of a substantial mass, of multi-stemmed *Rhapis excelsa*, lady palms, which made up the visually impenetrable, gently undulating wall, of this entry garden room. Thrusting strongly, demanding attention, some in front and some behind the lady palms, were well groomed clumps, of clear trunk *Acoelorrhaphe wrightii*, stretching up, three to four meters...all in all, this was an exciting planting that, recognized shade and deciduous factors in an organic and healthy composition...and provided sexual metaphors of intrigue.

The decorative focal point of this entry garden room was under the translucent portecochere...water and flowers...the archetypal garden experience. Chalmers looked at a quietly burbling, water fountain, terra cotta color, light sand blast finish, it was a self contained modern derivation of, the Alhambra's Court of

the Lions fountain...similar in size...a comfortable human scale. Between the stylized lions were stacked various sizes of matching terra cotta color pots... maybe sixty to seventy pots in total.

Protecting the feet of the lions, the smallest, lowest, most numerous pots, were at the outside edges, filled with the gray foliage, yellow flowered clumping *Gazania rigens*. In the medium sized pots, stepping up from the gazania, were every imaginable color of *Gerbera jamesonii* cultivars...hue intensities like, explosions, of fireworks...strong and loud. Lastly, between the lions, poking up taller than the fountain edge, were the great highlights of dried flowers from *Protea caffra* and *Protea cynaroides*. Displayed in tall, vertical pots, these accent protea...with stunning floral detail and incredibly large size...captured Chalmers' attention. Outstanding! A spectacular entry procession, culminating with captivating variety, loud color, and refreshing water, at the entry!

Chalmers paused a moment, and looked around to take it all in again...the water, the color, the healthy aura. Then he continued to the clubhouse door. He went inside. The air conditioning gave relief to the heat he had briefly forgotten.

3.4: The Vardon Clubhouse

Chalmers was early, in particular, because he thought he might look for the original Club Professional, Mr. Bankley Cuthbert, Esquire, a past member of the Royal and Ancient, who had come to help Sheik Mohamed build this course in the late 80s--and stayed. In the underpopulated world of long time Dubai landscape specialists, Mr. Cuthbert's reputation ran strongly before him. Chalmers had at least an hour to look around, to perhaps find Mr. Cuthbert, to talk about landscape.

Chalmers walked the clubhouse. It was filled with medium to dark, oak to mahogany wood detailing, and well stuffed oxblood-red, leather furnishings that had to have come from England--but, to save 75% on the price, most likely were knocked off in either, Viet Nam or China.

He confirmed the location of his scheduled meeting, the Spike Lounge. The Spike Lounge was on the lower level, and had a shaded terrace, with excellent views overlooking the 10th tee and the 18th green. There was an 'English-fry-up' buffet, every kind of meat, every kind of pork sausage and bacon--the breakfast of the Raj, the breakfast against which every doctor warned.

At the end of the buffet was a bar. The bar had ten to fifteen seats in front of a large picture window, providing an excellent view of the 18th green. It was a

weekday, less golfers, more businessmen making deals. Chalmers saw in silhouette against the 18th green, standing at the end of the bar, an older gentleman--with a 1920s Harry Vardon profile. Could that be?

That profile looked somehow familiar--then Chalmers recalled--as he had walked from the clubhouse entry, he had passed down two hallways: a hallway of champions, featuring large photos of every winner of the Dubai Desert Classic, over the past 25 years, a veritable who's who of professional golf, Seve Ballesteros, Fred Couples, Colin Montgomerie, Ernie Els, Tiger Woods...and a second hall of photos, commemorating the club professionals and the club captains over the years.

Chalmers was now certain he was looking at the silhouette of Mr. Bankley Cuthbert, Esquire, the very man himself, with whom he had hoped to speak. As in his hallway photo, he was dressed in a flannel shirt and tie, a light weight v-neck sweater, plus four pleated knickers with nearly knee high stockings, all in the most sedate of heather colors. Chalmers recalled details from the hallway bio that Mr. Cuthbert, Esquire, as the Emirates Golf Club's first golf pro, had overseen the first grassing in 1988. In the early 90s, he had overseen the expansion from 18 to 36 holes. According to his hallway bio, he had retired in 1996. He had, nevertheless, remained as the Emeritus Professional, known unofficially as 'the oldest member', and judging by his dress, certainly a man for landscape stories of unique detail and color, exactly what Chalmers was expecting.

Just then, Chalmers' cell phone vibrated. He checked. It was a text from the Sponsor who was just reaching the Clubhouse. The Sponsor was early, too. Before Chalmers even finished reading the first text message, the Sponsor had texted a second time. This time he texted he was at the Spike Lounge buffet, and did not like to wait.

3.5: Breakfast with Theuns

Before Chalmers finished reading the second text, his cell started ringing. Chalmers didn't pick up. Instead, he looked around and found Theuns van der Walt, the Sponsor, not far away next to the buffet. They shook hands.

Theuns, in the midst of an aggressive and very firm handshake, said, "Chalmers, pleased to meet you. Glad you made it. Let's begin."

The owner/developer company, Cultural Tourism Futures, was a well funded, and well connected Abu Dhabi government quango. Their representative, Theuns van der Walt, was a South African. He was thirty five, an impressive

rugby union player in his youth, and an avid Springbok supporter now. Theuns was five foot ten, and a thick, fit, robust two hundred pounds. He was a focussed, professional real estate development manager. He exhibited the tenacious qualities of white Dutch South Africans, who had helped build a solid and admirable economic power of a country over the centuries.

Theuns was always impeccably shaved, head and face, with the right amount of light sun tan overall. He dressed as if he just came off the catwalk in Milan--conservative and elegantly tasteful--appropriate sun glasses and no jewelry--Ermenegildo Zegna--all the way.

But, like many other white South Africans, he was happy to be working outside the country, and had no desire to return. Why? Because of the new black leadership in the country, which in his opinion, had led to a severe cultural and economic degradation. In Theuns case, it was disastrously exemplified two years ago. While Theuns was in Dubai, there was a racially motivated car jacking in Johannesburg, during which, his wife and his very young and only child, a son, were ripped from their car and ruthlessly murdered in cold blood, on the public street.

He was a man whose impatience, and worldly lust, could only be the result of the shocking killing of his family, from which he had never fully recovered.

From the buffet, they both took coffee and toast, then found a table with a view of the 18th green. The weather made inside, the only option. It was not yet 10AM; but outside temperature was 39°C and rising, and the humidity was 70%--hot and oppressively humid, even in the shade--normal Dubai weather.

Looking at Theuns' business card, Chalmers asked him, "What is it exactly that Sponsors, or, more specifically, Task Force Stream Sponsors, like you, do at CTF?"

Theuns, with an impatient, dissonant tone, went on about how the latest trends in business management, social justice, environmental sustainability, etc were all wrapped into a matrix system of job responsibility at CTF. He continued, "While there is no direct chain of command in this matrix system, I have the final project financial, and schedule responsibility in front of the CEO and the Executive Board."

Chalmers said, "Ok, I like the clarity of one point of authority and communication, that should work well. The matrix system? It sounds a bit awkward, but I am sure you won't let it hinder my work. Now, following from

our Skype, lets get to specifics. Please tell me in particular what you expect from me, and the appropriate details.”

Theuns, always with a grudging tone, responded, “What I expect? The best site finishes ever, on time, and on budget! Any questions there?”

“None at all, that’s what I do; but give me some background, please.”

Theuns continued, “On the landscape we have no one internally with the appropriate field experience; and our Project Management team, our Consultant and our General Contractor just can't seem to make it happen. They are not responsive--not effective--not efficient, we are not getting a 100% result! And we do not have time to change horses!!!”

He continued, “Look, this is CTF’s first major built project, our financial backers and our marketing, our branding people require it to be special. We expect Condé Nast to rank, our Empty Quarter Project, which we call Liwa Qsar, #1 in their 2011 world list of the best new resort destinations; and, we are more than three months behind schedule, with only six months till soft opening. We expect a major A-lister opening event, including all the leaders from all the Emirates. Since I am the Sponsor, I want to say this clearly, in words that you understand, my ass is on the line, and your ass, too, will be on the line. My position is ‘no fail!’”

Theuns got on a roll. He was pushing, he was hot, impatience on the boil, “We have a lot of first class people on this project; but maybe it is because we are so deep in the Empty Quarter. The project is for only 200 keys, but we have to bring power and water from over 100 kilometers to the site. We have to be ethically responsible and environmentally responsible, no matter what the logic. We are building a fixed destination in a place where for centuries the few people ever passing through were...nomads! The challenges are many. We need that place first class in six months. I want to know, are you on board, or not?”

Theuns hadn't touched his toast. His coffee was gone, and he was on his third cigarette. His Blackberry was buzzing every three minutes, and, he just could not put it down.

Chalmers said, “Look, you are paying me fairly. I'll dig into it this week and meet you for an end of the day update this Thursday. I'll brief you on what I've found, and I'll outline an action plan to get CTF its finish and award quality, on schedule. But, Theuns, you’ve got to know, that I will need you to clear things for me--cut the red tape, give me line level vetoes on invoices, and no downtown meetings, do you follow?”

“Chalmers, I’ll do what is needed; but it’s you who must not fail.”

Chalmers got the message, “That’s clear enough. Just give me the contact details of the responsables, and Thursday, I’ll show you how it will be accomplished.”

Theuns concluded their meeting, “Excellent, let’s get this rolling. We’ll meet at The Library, Thursday then, say, 9PM?”

They agreed.

Theuns texted Chalmers the contact details for the on site CTF Hospitality Director, the General Contractor, the Project Management team, the Landscape Consultant, the Landscape Contractor and all other applicable Sub-Contractors. Theuns then excused himself and left.

Chalmers remained, and began to set up his meetings. Tonight he would begin with the Landscape Consultant.

EPISODE 4: THE WALK

Zack de la Rocha described, all too well, the forceful, the imposing downstream hierarchy, in these types of projects, when he wrote:
They say jump, you say, how high.

4.1: A Large International Project

Yogi Berra had it right. He said, "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice there is."

The same evening, Chalmers was on his way to meet with the Landscape Consultant for the Liwa Qsar Project.

How does a very large, a very complex--1.5 kilometers long, more than thirty international consultants--how does a very large and complex project like this, get built?

Here's the simple summary: there are three players. Number one, the owner--the owner has the money and property to develop the project. Number two, the consultant--the consultant does the design and engineering for the project; and, number three, the contractor--he builds the project. Then the owner moves in and operates the project. Straight forward, right?

Almost...

Here is how it works, in theory and practice, in real life. The Owner Developer intends to build a certain project, and, is the money behind that project. At the outset, at the behest of an Owner Developer, like CTF, Consultants drive projects like this Liwa Qsar Project. That is the theory.

The Owner Developer hires a Consultant for the design and engineering. The generic Consultant is often, in reality, a team of up to thirty or more Sub-Consultants, each responsible for specific aspects of design. The Consultant translates the Owner Developer intent into design documents. The design documents are a coded set of reproducible plans, drawings, and specifications, that, translate the Owner Developer intent into a buildable project. The Owner Developer then hires a General Contractor to build the project, according to those design documents. The General Contractor then hires and coordinates, a wide range of specialist Sub-Contractors, to build their individual specialist parts of the construction.

The Consultant provides oversight during construction, to assure, that the Owner Developer original intent is met and built according to the design documents. In the end, though, the practical, real life reality is, the General Contractor truly drives the built project, because, he has the final responsibility for opening on time, all liability, all warranties, for everything built.

Now, that is the simple tradition--the simple project process, the players, and the basic template for all projects. However, with large, complex, international projects, like this one, in addition to the usual personality tensions between thirty or more consultants, and another, thirty or more contractors, and their suppliers, lots of extra layers of management are often added. And Chalmers, he sees these as problems--each extra layer of management, tends to fray the clarity, fray the directness, fray the quality of the project--for example.

The Owner Developer often hires a Project Management team, to reduce the Owner Developer's workload, and to oversee the day to day schedules and activities of the Consultant and the General Contractor. Then during the design process, these often inexperienced Design Managers from the Owner Developer and Project Management teams, second, third and fourth guess the Consultant. These continuous battles often undermine not only Consultant morale, but also, project quality.

After this, if the Consultant has any morale or will power left, it is completely burned away, by an additional series of reviews--cost control reviews. Chalmers calls them 'acid washes'. Actually, these cost control reviews are known as the value engineering process, or VE, for short. Essentially, VE is when people who know little about either the construction process, the local procurement market, or the local environmental conditions, get a chance to look good by simply lowering the cost estimates--less natural stone, more concrete, thinning the hard materials, less, less, less--smaller trees, simpler way-finding, less interpretation systems, less lighting. These VE people regularly have no idea about how contemporary social culture, that is, the local people, will actually use the site, the project, on a diurnal and seasonal basis. Most of the time, the VE result begins a snow balling disaster that ends up in Chalmers' in-box.

So, by the time a project gets to the site for construction, the Consultant has been severely beaten up. Is it important? And, what does this mean in reality?

It means the Consultant rarely has Western trained senior people on the job site. In other words, on the job site, the Consultant usually gets abused--they often just get walked all over. On site, the Consultant staff sit in the office, the air-conditioned office--wait for materials submittals--wait for shop drawings--wait

for requests for information--wait for requests for inspections--wait for as-built drawing submittals.

All of this happens, in this part of the world, as 45-50°C temperatures and sand blasting windstorms 'conspire' to make sure, no Consultant ever leaves the air conditioned site offices, to visit the actual work in progress, thus opening more doors to undermine the final result quality. These are additional quality gaps that Chalmers often fills.

And all this happens as the Owner Developer's financial, public marketing and brand image are all under pressure to have opening day festivities occur exactly when originally promised two years earlier--huge pressure on both Contractor and Consultant, in a major time squeeze--just to assure that the Owner Developer intent and promises are met at the scheduled opening day. The Consultant has been battered. The Consultant has become fatigued.

The Consultant, however, is in business to make money through repeat work with clients. So, in order to maintain reputation and workload, the Consultant must apply reasonable attention during the construction.

This was Chalmers' work environment.

4.2: JBR Dubai

These large projects always occurred in a miasmic fog of evolving problems and conflicts wherein solutions would be ultimately discovered in real time during construction. Within this understanding of the project process context, Chalmers went to visit the Landscape Consultant, Land Iterations and Derivatives, whom everybody knew by their short name, LandID. LandID was an American landscape architecture company. Geoffrey Tate, a Brit, was their UAE and Mid East Regional Director.

On the Liwa Qsar Project, LandID, were the responsible consultant for all the site finishes, the usual landscape architecture stuff--plants, irrigation, paving, walls, pergolas, water features, and oversight on wayfinding, signage, lighting, grading, drainage--the usual landscape architecture stuff.

Geoffrey Tate and Chalmers were to meet at Jumeirah Beach Residence, JBR, in New Dubai, on The Walk, at the Cafe di Roma. Chalmers arrived early again. He sat down at the cafe, checked his iPhone for connectivity, and opened an iChat session, with Madge.

Chalmers ordered a Turin hot chocolate. It was a warm chocolate pudding; he liked it, winter or summer. It was 9PM, just getting dark, the temperature was 30°C, with a cooling, light breeze off the Gulf; and the evening crowd, the paseo, was just building.

In New Dubai, The Walk was a linear promenade, stretching along four, maybe five city blocks. It consisted of narrow frontage fashion shop hang outs, cafes, restaurants, cheek by jowl, opening onto one side of a thirty meter wide pedestrian promenade. Fifteen meters of the promenade were given over to umbrella'd tables along the shop fronts. The balance was a palm tree lined paseo show place. At the curb edge was a one lane, one way, traffic calmed road--talk about show and tell--the hottest cars in Dubai crawled it--every night. And beyond the crawl, the sand beaches of Jumeirah and the Gulf. It was all about see and be seen.

The Walk generated a vibrant, real-life, cultural mix, a front-page social tabloid, if you will, including a good sprinkling of Emiratis, loads of Middle East Arabs (Egyptians, Lebanese), some Magrebis (North Africans), some sub-Saharan Africans, lots of Eastern and Western Europeans, and people from the old British Commonwealth...the South Africans, the Australians, the New Zealanders...some Bollywood sub-continentals, and a few North American expatriates, with their rambunctious pet dogs, barely kept on leashes. The Walk had become a real-time mingling of Western pop culture with regional and local traditions...perhaps exemplifying the promise, the buzz of a 'peaceful', multi-cultural future, Dubai-style.

4.3: Geoffrey and Tang

Chalmers had just finished his iChat with his wife; and he was absorbing the diverse dynamic of the paseo crowd, when Geoffrey Tate arrived--along with a companion, a fashionable young Chinese lady, Wenli Tang, whom Geoffrey described as his office personal assistant.

Chalmers had not expected a threesome. Tang, so softly and confidently exuded a blossoming aura of beauty, that Chalmers felt a blur overcoming his professional focus. She had the studied, detached presence of a Parisian catwalk model, and a sexual magnetism intense enough to disable any man. Who would ride in a Lamborghini, and emerge like a butterfly from one of those gull wing doors? She would.

Porcelain skin, soft make up, short black...elegant, yet punk styled hair with a vivid pink streak. She wore a Mao-collar, silk chemise, in soft greys, luxuriantly hugging her slender, curvaceous body. Over the chemise, she had casually

draped around her neck, a finely woven black pashmina, one corner accented in vivid pink, by custom embroidered, classic Lalique themed art work. Her chemise fell just to mid thigh, loosely covering the tops of her black leotard, which allowed her gracefully slender legs to be exclamation pointed by vivid pink, platform stiletto heels.

Chalmers greeted her, caught his breath, and quickly gained composure, mentally reminding himself where his focus should be: the project, Liwa.

Geoffrey Tate was gracious, and welcoming. He had brought a complete set of design documents, including bound A3 size landscape drawings, and a thumb drive, with the same, including specifications and bills of quantities, all of which he handed over to Chalmers.

Geoffrey Tate was in the prime of his consultancy career, forty, single, six feet tall, 175 pounds. He was like certain public school Brits, who imagine themselves landed aristocrats, carrying under the surface a long-seated envy and bitterness, regarding the 'recent' American independence and subsequent prominence in the world.

He reminded Chalmers of the Guy Berger character, in a Dubai film he had seen during his Zurich-Manama flight a couple nights ago, *City of Life*, written and directed by an Emirati, Ali Mostafa. The film inspected the lives of people in different contemporary Dubai subcultures. Geoffrey was the successful expat, Guy Berger party boy, taking what he could get from the inventory of Eastern European and East Asian girls here in Dubai--girls, trying to save their lives, or just making a living like everyone else.

His hair was short, blond, cropped as is fashionable, with a bit of a...Rod Stewart...David Bowie...look. Geoffrey obviously had his fun, definitely a leg over merchant.

But Geoffrey, in most respects, was smart and focussed enough as a consummate professional to take advantage of his intense emotions. After his professional degrees from Greenwich and Edinburgh, he earned his Landscape Institute credential following a period with Ove Arup on a major international multi-consultancy project in the Middle East. During that project, he had worked closely for the first time with the famous master planning and design consultant, LandID, who afterwards offered him a position in their Los Angeles office.

He moved up quickly, becoming a Studio Leader, and then Partner. Now managing the LandID satellite office in the UAE, his focus was solely on his bonus-based, bottom line office performance. He was very successful. He was

the only Brit in their office of thirteen here. His employees included Tang, and eleven technical specialists, five from the Philippines, four from India, and two Egyptians.

He epitomized the newly-minted Western expat, interested in his own pleasures--not silk shirt, not hair shirt, but clubbing like there would be no tomorrow.

4.4: Urban Pleasures, Dubai Style

Geoffrey ordered some kind of iced skinny, minny latte for himself, and for Tang, a green tea. Chalmers, Geoffrey and Tang--the three of them together marveled at the electricity in the crowd--buzzing, bustling in all the cafes, along the boisterous paseo, pulsating out of the hot mega-cars, posturing in slow motion along The Walk.

Gesturing out toward the noisy paseo, Chalmers chuckled ironically, and asked, "Is this the faceless, soulless, plastic Dubai, critics commonly bemoan?"

Geoffrey gasped, "Ha!! This is only the beginning. Dubai is full of these kinds of places, each unique, each having a different cultural base."

"Chalmers, you must have been to Diyafa Street," he continued, "where Jumeira and Satwa converge near the port? There is absolutely no room to walk on the broad sidewalks. It is so crowded in the evenings--it's little Teheran."

Tang said, "Al Fahidi Street, if you like the back streets of India, great textile shops, skilled tailors, designers, everything, plus, hidden away small restaurants...veg...pure veg...mixed...you name it. And then there is the Hor Al Anz, in Deira, a Pakistani and Bangladeshi neighborhood, with great skilled craftsmen, great prices and great street cafes."

She knew the town, and added, "It is the Lebanese...their nearly century long links to France...then their 1980s diaspora, and their easy migration here, on the heels of the 1970s Iranians, that has opened the door, for what we see today, in front of us. This is not Kuwait, not Bahrain...not even Abu Dhabi...Dubai is special!" The three of them were definitely in the camp of Dubai, a truly world class city.

They relaxed, watched the paseo culture kaleidoscope, and enjoyed.

4.5: Landscape Consultant

In this meeting for project success, Chalmers sought an edge. He caught Geoffrey's eye and asked, "I wonder Geoffrey, regarding our project and your office, if LandID is an American company, then, why are no Americans in your office?"

Geoffrey explained, "None of the recent American graduates, or any of the mid-level Americans, wanted to leave the US lifestyle for staffing this local office, even for limited three month windows. Why? Perhaps either too comfortable at home, or just too soft...either way, no problem for me."

"I set this office up to be a successful profit center, and as long as I can find capable landscape staff from other countries, which I have done without any problems, I am very happy with the results. Most design is done back in the US; but all field work and project administration are done right here in our office."

Chalmers pressed for details about their design and its implementation, "Tell me, what does LandID really want out of this project?"

Geoffrey was truthful, "We will be profitable. Our company is well known in the US, and the world, for its award winning master planning and well-crafted design for destination resorts. And over the past four years we have already built two wildly successful, international award winning projects in Dubai. LandID has a look, a style whose success has been built upon a practical local flexibility regarding attention to detail, both in hard materials and plants. We have a lot of the basic things, the practical fundamentals in place for successful implementation in this region."

"It suits work out here," he explained, "where climate, work force, client whims, and, a fickle and weakly developed local support industry mean that the best of detailing could never be achieved."

Listening to these words, Chalmers heard in Geoffrey's voice a veiled tone of fatalism. Chalmers quickly concluded that was another reason why he would be needed on this project. He kept his thoughts to himself and looked at Geoffrey with uncertainty, maybe even with outright disapproval.

Geoffrey, without pause, continued, "Look at it how you like; but you must be realistic. You know as well as I, it is either a quality compromise to work out here or, it is our success just to get it built under these difficult circumstances."

Chalmers knew Geoffrey had a practical point. But Chalmers always strove to get the best craft, to get that elegant beauty on opening day. To achieve an

elegant result through balance with local practicality would always be a challenge. A Consultant should never give up striving.

Chalmers took a deep breath, relaxed, and gazed at the parade of US\$250K-plus automobiles, slowly working their way down the traffic calmed street, between the cafes and the beach. He saw, in those autos, the beauty, the craft, the art. They were a symbol, a symbol of efforts, to make beauty a part of life...beautiful cars, beautiful girls, beautiful gardens. And he would achieve a beautiful solution at the Liwa Qsar Empty Quarter project, no matter what.

4.6: Working in Dubai

Chalmers' fear for the worst was confirmed. The LandID construction package for Liwa Qsar, their bid package, their design documents, had been detailed using the 'copy and paste' and 'favorites' techniques from their earlier projects, by young American graduates working in the US. Those young professionals had never seen this part of the world, let alone even built a project here. To them it was all desert, the coast of Dubai, and the Liwa Oasis, 300 kilometers inland--all the same. Chalmers knew there could be problems in that approach. He knew that the local Liwa reality, the site, its topography and climate, were certainly more complex and significantly different.

Chalmers put a challenge to Geoffrey, "So, LandID do not have a pro-active site team--you are leaving it to a sub-contractor, who is not really performing well for all the final touches?"

Geoffrey took a matter of fact defensive saying, "We, I and our site people, are going through the professional motions; and, it is not our responsibility to goose an unresponsive, poorly performing, contractor. We just push the paperwork."

Then, as he leaned over to Chalmers and quietly revealed his cynicism for work in this region, Geoffrey may have gone further than he should have, "Let's talk a second about sustainability. If you settled in an area, a region, such as this, where there has never been enough water, or, enough food...and stayed here... then you would have to be either A) stupid; or B) cursed. That is the baseline condition here."

Geoffrey continued, "And furthermore, this place is a hell, a hell where naive, poorly educated people of all ages come to work, and provide services, for long hours, six days per week, via one, two or three layers of vampiric middle men and scurrilous project managers whose only business is to make more money for themselves by cheating these poor souls!"

“Whoa,” Chalmers interjected. “That is a bit of sardonic hyperbole! I’ve been around enough consultants and contractors to know that truly ambitious people come to the Emirates from the East to successfully improve their lives, returning home after they have reached their goals. They work hard here, live frugally, saving money to start a new business when they get back home, to build better lives for their families. There is nothing naive about that. You can’t lump everyone in together. And you, you too, make a living here, yourself--as a consultant, or, an activist?”

Geoffrey’s eyes looked out onto the people of the paseo. He was silent. Tang, was silent.

4.7: Landscape Contractor

Chalmers had one more project area to explore with the landscape consultant. Before he got started, he spooned out the last of his hot chocolate, or rather, his chocolate pudding. Then his eyes and attention drifted into the unceasing paseo. It was impossible to ignore--such a great street scene--no drunken bums--no aggressive trouble makers--what a civilized pleasure it was, just sitting here, talking. This was a clean public area--much nicer than the old waterfronts of Bur Dubai and Deira--this was a place he was sure that Madge would like.

Then he went back to work, refocussed the discussion, and asked Geoffrey about the Liwa Qsar Project, General Contractor. Chalmers started, “Usually the General Contractor can squeeze performance out of his Sub-Contractors...”

Geoffrey interrupted and explained, “This Landscape Sub-Contractor is new to the UAE. The senior responsible people have had twenty five years experience in Saudi Arabia. Their real strength is their Emirati sponsor, a high ranking Sheik in the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, whose sister married the ruling President of Dubai. As you can imagine, with those contacts they are a, no questions asked, nominated Sub-Contractor; and, as such, the General Contractor, and we, were forced to accept them. They do have well experienced senior Lebanese managers, and a large nursery; but, the people who are on site, they always say yes; but they never produce according to the schedule, or, at the required quality. So we do the paperwork--non-conformance reports, etc.--you know the drill.”

Chalmers, though he already knew the answer, asked, “Ever go out to site?”

Geoffrey unabashedly said, “No, and, why should I? One of the VE exercises deleted all our senior site support, and replaced it with junior paper pushers. That is it. We do have two graduate Pinoy architects on site, and they’re good

fellows. They've been working in the UAE for at least five years each, and know how to keep the paper work timely and flowing."

Chalmers had heard enough. Changing the subject, he asked, "Geoffrey, I might need to visit, where is your office?"

"Right here in JBR. Just call, or text me anytime, and we can arrange a meeting."

In conclusion, and one last time, out of professional responsibility, Chalmers told him he was planning to visit the site, and the Contractor's nursery this week and would like to have Geoffrey there with him.

Geoffrey declined, saying, "From tomorrow, I'll be out of town for a new project in Qatar."

That, too, was much as Chalmers had expected. "No problem," replied Chalmers.

Geoffrey did offer, he would be glad to answer any questions Chalmers might have. Chalmers thanked him for his time and the contract documents.

They shook hands and Chalmers left. Geoffrey and Tang stayed to hang out.

EPISODE 5: RUB AL KHALI COASTAL

Maha Gargash, the famous Emirati author, wrote about the 1950s, wrote about the struggling human culture, built to survive, on the edges of the massive Rub al Khali.

She wrote:

It's not true. I come from a tribe, the Al Salmi tribe.

It was a strong tribe, and, honorable.

Just because they didn't live in houses, does not mean they weren't important.

5.1: Chalmers' Lenses

Despite the last minute circumstances around which Chalmers normally received requests to fix projects, he always endeavored to understand the larger landscape context of those projects. To Chalmers, this included understanding the regional geography, both natural and cultural. Knowledge imparted strength.

To broaden his understanding of the Rub Al Khali, Chalmers would vary his his perception of his project study subject, through a variety of questions, then, with each question, he would consider a variety of options, he called each option, a lens--each different lens varying, in its magnification. He would then sieve the varieties of information he discovered, to end up with the nuggets, the nuggets that could elevate project quality.

For example, he asked himself, exactly where does the Rub Al Khali start and end? Do you measure it on a map of the world...a map of the Arabian Peninsula...a map of the Abu Dhabi Emirate...a map of the Abu Dhabi Municipality? Or, on a map of oral history, as told by a Liwa Oasis resident? Is it a question of natural geography, or, cultural geography? Is it a question of geographic space, or, geologic time?

Chalmers used all resources, to understand the landscape, to filter information, to gain knowledge, to enrich his project.

5.2: Preparations

Chalmers' kismet meeting in Bahrain with his old friend, Jean-Claude Thibaut, had been useful--a potential nugget, a knowledge resource to cherish. Jean-Claude had rearranged his schedule in order to free up a couple days in the UAE. In particular, he offered to spend a day with Chalmers to drive him the three hours from Dubai to the Empty Quarter Project and the three hours back. Jean-Claude had arrived in Dubai yesterday morning. By the afternoon, he had coordinated with Chalmers to organize their time together over the next week.

On the surface, because of their similar interests and friendship, Jean-Claude was satisfied to share his knowledge and experience with Chalmers. But it was deeper than that for Jean-Claude. Years back, he had worked on a re-forestation project through the United Nations in Vrindavan, India. Vrindavan was a place rich, not only in ethnobotanical history, but also, in timeless spiritual traditions. During his time there, he took up the study of yoga--in a time of disciplined introspection that had helped his focus, on his own personal life goals. He concluded his personal nature was best served by sharing his knowledge with others. This became the deep foundation, the solid framework for both his professional and collegial relationships with Chalmers.

Together, they coordinated the trip to the Empty Quarter project, and the route to take. They concluded it to be a chance to see, during the three hour drive inland, how the Rub Al Khali landscape evolved from the urban coastal edge into the unpopulated inland heart of the sand desert. This was a drive Chalmers had never taken.

Jean-Claude had rented a 4-wheel drive SUV, a Toyota Land Cruiser--white--with a large gas tank and wayfinding kit--a Garmin Nuvi with the most recent desert data already downloaded. The drive, a useful landscape transect, would start with 120 kilometers along the Gulf coast from Dubai to Abu Dhabi, followed by another 30 kilometers along the coast to the Hameem turnoff. They would finish at the project, after a final run due South 150 kilometers, directly into the relentless, shifting, arid, sand desert...the Empty Quarter, the Rub Al Khali.

5.3: Ashura Redux

Early in the morning, Jean-Claude drove the Land Cruiser to Chalmers' hotel. Chalmers was waiting. He loaded his things and then climbed right in. After greetings, Chalmers immediately challenged Jean-Claude, "Before we start anything new, your forced march in Muharraaq, to the *zanjil* parade the other day just about did me in. I couldn't get it out of my head--damn near missed my flight--couldn't sleep that night--every time you talk me into some kind of over the edge cultural landscape event, I end up struggling, struggling to keep my professional armor in tact!"

Jean-Claude replied, "You're acting like I was trying to undermine you, Chalmers?! You know that's not the case. Too many professionals do not want to see, or even just hear about, the 'unclean' reality of human relationships with the landscape. Modern memes are to simplify everything...there is definitely a trend toward a technology driven, atheistic secularism...that commoditizes the landscape...when in reality, just under the surface is a richness of understanding

and diversity of explanations between humans and plants, humans and the landscape...why ignore it...why sweep it under the rug? Besides, isn't the sharing of this richness what you and I have been doing together, the last twenty years or so? Your thin American roots--they show."

"Yeah, yeah, hey, my roots give me focus; and you, you get so far over the edge, so often. Look, before we get on the road, you've got to agree to this--if you ever, invite me to an Opus Dei picnic, what I am sure you will call a 'landscape event', you have to be straight with me, remind me to say no--a flat out no, with no seductive, quasi-professional arguments, ok?"

Jean-Claude with a smirk, asked, "Do you have it all out of your system, yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's get on the road, eh?"

"About time, the sun has already risen. The weather is windy and dusty. It's a *shamal*, a wind out of the north, oftentimes associated with windstorm conditions. If it gets any worse, we won't see anything today."

5.4: Historical Landscape Transect

If all went well today Chalmers could harvest for his project, both historical from Jean-Claude and also, real time Empty Quarter information. Chalmers and Jean-Claude began their drive. Their trip to the Liwa Oasis would be a transect through the Empty Quarter. Departing Dubai, they took the Sheik Zayed Road toward Abu Dhabi. But upon entering Sheik Zayed Road, they found it a total gridlock.

TRANSECT⁴
T:01/11 START
KM-0000
05:30
25°05'07.86"N
55°08'36.90"E
EL:0002M

Chalmers said, "We have shamal and gridlock, not an auspicious start."

Jean-Claude relaxed in the driver's seat, and smiling, said, "Except that you are trapped on the left side of your brain, Chalmers, it really is good to work with

⁴ Each transect has the following information stacked from top to bottom: the transect number of the total eleven; the cumulative kilometer total starting at 000 from Chalmers' Dubai hotel; the local time; the northing and easting; and, the elevation in meters above mean sea level.

you again. You asked about how I got involved with Liwa? Well, with this gridlock, it is easy to talk. A few years back, I gave a short course at Harvard. In the course, I had a student, an Emirati--a person whose family originally came, from the Liwa Oasis. He asked me to assist in, setting up the structure for his research, on historical relationships between human culture and plants in extremely arid environments. A guy with Bedouin roots asked me to help him study the landscape--I was gung ho!"

Chalmers quickly added, "I'm sure, I am looking forward to hearing all about it. But let's focus, we're heading to Hameem, on the east end of the Liwa Oasis. Did you ever visit this place before? What was it like? Did you visit it regularly or, just once or twice. Tell me."

Jean-Claude said, "It was about four years ago...then for more than nine months, almost a year, I drove the road from Abu Dhabi to Hameem, three or four times a week out and back. I used to pass through Hameem and go further, another twenty five kilometers, about halfway to Mazaira. Mazaira is a town in the center of that 100 kilometer long, linear strip of dune valleys known as the Liwa Oasis."

"Then you saw it regularly, that's great! Fill me in, tell me more." Chalmers thought this is where Jean-Claude's colorful and rambling approach is best value.

"The Hameem road was paved the entire way. It was literally a long, slow ride out of and past the edge of civilization into another world...starved of water, starved of contemporary cultural landmarks. I felt like I was going back in time as I drove. It didn't even have kilometer post markings. I liked to call it a drought attenuated connection to modern life."

"With each kilometer I drove further south, the desert dominated more and more. The deeper I drove into the Empty Quarter, the more and more I felt isolated. The Empty Quarter had a strangely conflicting sort of isolation." Jean-Claude paused, memories flowing through his head.

Chalmers was eager for this kind of detail and pressed, "What do you mean?"

"...an uncomfortable effect...there was something inherently uncomfortable sitting somewhere, beneath the seductive visual beauty and mesmerizing motion of the dunes..." Jean-Claude got lost again in his thoughts.

"Carry on! Carry on!"

Jean-Claude chuckled a bit and said, “Sometimes it was like I might as well have been watching the desert on TV, at home...maybe it was my car, the air conditioned metal box, that gave me such a protected feeling...”

He continued, “...as alluring as the dunes were, day in, day out...there was something that pushed me away...I could not fully define the breadth of that feeling. But a large part of it was the brightness. There are two things about brightness here, the sun itself...but more so, the brightness of the sun reflections off the sand. The brightness forced me to look away...forced my eyes to desire shelter...and there was, no shelter. It was an aggressive brightness...and that was as seen from the protection and shelter of my car, what I came to to call, my ‘AC box’!”

Chalmers noted, “Ok, I’m sure this is headed somewhere useful, it is intriguing--an interesting choice of words.”

Speaking over Chalmers, Jean-Claude continued, “My AC box had tinted windows and I had polarized lens sun glasses...but the brightness...where does what you see gradually become so bright to be injurious to your eye, and not far from blinding? Chalmers, there was this section of desert on the way to Hameem, where I recall, the color of the sand...it was a blend that either by light reflection from the colors themselves...or light refraction because of heat waves...the sand was a blend, a vibrating mix of, a hot pink and, a psychedelic orange. In the mid-day sun, I could see these colors vibrating...impossible to focus...the heat...the brightness...the color...my eyes hurt like I’d never experienced...I was seeing movement, change that my sense of sight could not compute...I wasn’t looking at the sun, but the sand!”

Chalmers observed, “I’d call that some kind of natural warning, wouldn’t you?”

Jean-Claude continued, “Give me a break, this stuff is not your normal linear engineering text book stuff! There was some weird science, too. Because we are on the Tropic of Cancer...mid-day, most of the year, there are no shadows. No shadow means our standard place and time, sun-based reference points are missing...just, plain, absent. The most fundamental visual signpost with which we have all grown up, shadow, has disappeared...the sun is out, but there are no shadows. They had been replaced with optical illusions...with visual imbalance...I don’t know, I never really came to grips with it...all these things added up...but then, they didn’t add up.”

“Time out, time out--we are over the edge.”

“Patience, patience, there is more,” Jean-Claude added. “Late in the afternoon, with the sun lower in the sky, the shadows returned to transform the entire landscape. It is not a cliché, it was a reality...I could have sworn, I was, at sea... I felt movement...rolling swells...choppy waves as far as I could see in any direction...”

Chalmers interrupted, smiling, “I guess I can imagine that; but I’ll have to see it to believe it. I suppose you are also going to tell me you felt sea sickness while driving, aren’t you?”

“Of course not Chalmers, but...”

Then Chalmers changed the subject, trying to adjust the focus, “What else do you recall? Any traditional, any standard landmarks at all?”

“Well, let’s see, I remember what looked like a huge international communications station just off the road, and a sign post here or there for oil rigs. I’m sure you can relate to that. Most days, I’d see only two or three other vehicles the entire trip. Sometimes I did see *uber*-sized vehicles, the tires themselves as tall as an SUV, crawling ever so slowly along the road edge... 20kph or so...they were oil rig, soft sand vehicles, with tires, cab and trailer three times or more larger than anything normally seen on the road.”

With impatience and humor, Chalmers took over, “So, let me summarize, Jean-Claude, you had vehicles three times as large as normal, traveling 1/5 normal speed, no shadows, psychedelic orange sand--what was going on? Something strange with you, maybe? Getting into the plants, again? Definitely over the edge! This is just the way you always take a ride on the landscape, suspend your logic and let the landscape take you for a ride. Listening to you is like reading a Kerouac novel. I’ve got to turn my filters on high. You’re making me pay for this info!!!”

“No, not at all! Look, Chalmers, you’ve got to broaden your view. What I meant when I said the road was a tenuous extension of human civilization into an area not accustomed to human civilization is that a paved road has a lot of civilized implications that the adjacent landscape just challenged. That was all stripped away...except for my AC box on wheels...and there weren’t even any radio stations.”

“Animals, what about animals, wild life, fauna, anything like that, Jean-Claude?”

“There were camels being herded along the roadside, and the inevitable camel roadkill. Life and death were close to me on the roadside everyday. Once a

month or so, I'd see a rigor mortis camel just off the shoulder...I never saw one being hauled away...I never saw one decomposing...someone must have hauled them away. Otherwise roadkill just turned up every time I was not expecting it...a desert gazelle, desert lizard, desert snake...and the odd goat.”

Jean-Claude continued, “The camels...the camels were absolutely magic, Chalmers! This is camel country. I would see hundreds of them at a time, grazing just off the roadside. They moved over the sands as if they carried no weight at all...and you know how hard it is for humans to walk through soft sand. The camels had a resolute gait...a presence that said...they belonged here. These were not circus or tourist camels. These were camels being taken care of, being bred...bred for racing. They looked strong, proud, at home.”

Jean-Claude recalled further, “There were no highway lights, no lights anywhere. Driving at night was like being in a tunnel by yourself continuously for 150 kilometers. Sometimes I wanted to do the night drive without headlights...using only moonlight. It was eerie...no plants...no water...no vehicles...no nothing...a huge sand desert...a strip of asphalt...my vehicle...and me...eerie, eerie, indeed. I'd stop for a moment and turn the engine off...dead silence...often it was still, infinitely still; but I could see what, who knows, gazillions of stars...I felt as if I had been dropped into obscurity...silence...isolation...extreme emptiness...extreme distance...no point of reference for human civilization...Chalmers, I have seen lots of strange landscapes in my life, and stranger human interactions with plants, landscapes...but out there...sometimes...if I say otherworldly, the connotations get in the way...I often felt like the desert was driving me out of it...I often felt an urgency to be free of it...get out of it...to see the lights of Dubai...the signs of human civilization.”

Chalmers jumped in, “Right, you always take me to some existential stepping off point. I do have work to do. What do you remember about Hameem, that's the last town before my project. Do you have any memories from there? ”

“Special for Hameem? Well...it had the only gas station on the east end of Liwa...a typical, how do you say it...one horse town...stop for gas...listen...you could hear a car coming from more than a kilometer away. That was a big event...following it with your eyes through its entire time of visibility. Then, it was quiet again, back to normal.”

“Did you see people? What kind? Who were they?”

“Contract farm workers. They looked like they had spent their entire lives out there...a bit like, ocean going seamen who have been at sea their entire lives...they had a certain, hardened look...the look of people, outside the rules of

civilized law...the look of survivors, who had faced down serious duress... carrying that experience, implanted into their souls and carved into their faces. They were survivors in a landscape that defied any contemporary concept of modern life material sustainability. They knew there was no compromise with this beast of a sand desert. They took the suffering it gave...and feebly, feebly they recovered, what they could.

Real-time hell, that's what it often felt like Chalmers...everyday for months at a time...you had to shrink away from it, to survive. People who lived there, did not fight it. It is unique, a daily core reality...this huge, arid, sand desert, in a tropic zone...it's something fundamentally opposite from temperate zones...it is in your face 24/7/365...the heat kills...the sun kills...the lack of water kills... the lack of arable land depresses...the blowing sand ravages...maybe those, those are the uncomfortable threats, just barely hidden, beneath the slyly seductive, surface sands."

Those were strong words about their destination. Jean-Claude and Chalmers, both fell silent.

5.5: Dubai Landmarks

T-02/11
KM:0023
05:50
24°56'48.77"N
55°03'44.30"E
EL:0019M

The gridlock started loosening up as they passed Ibn Battuta Mall, one of Chalmers' local landmarks. Dubai had been going through fits and bursts of development over the past 25 years, each burst leaving in its wake a variety of landmarks, including the Dubai Marina, Jumeirah Lakes Towers, Dubai Aluminum and Jbel Ali Port. Now as the traffic was almost normal, they had just started passing the ill-fated Nakheel development named Waterfront.

The wind and blowing dust were wicked. The place was derelict, deserted. Ten meter high plywood hoardings at the Waterfront perimeter boasted with faded, hi-res graphics, a new city--for 1.5 million people--with 1.5 billion square feet of development--to become twice the size of Hong Kong in only twenty years.

Off in the distance, Nakheel's new ten story office building sat empty--complete, but empty. The *shamal* wind tattered and ripped the blatant advertising slogans off the perimeter hoardings. It was essentially an abandoned 100 square kilometer site, with nothing rising from the ground, nothing, but a swirling, sandy, dust and a wispy ghost of unfulfilled dreams.

The deserted building, the empty site, the sandstorm, and the windblown torn, desperately flapping advertising together reminded Jean-Claude of a computer game trailer he had recently seen. He asked, “You into computer games?”

“Yeah, believe it or not, they interest me. For the landscape graphics, the backgrounds, the foregrounds, why’d you ask?”

“Landscape! This, too, is all about landscape! There is a first person shooter series, on-going since the late 1990s, called *Spec Ops*. Their newest, yet to be released version, is called, *Spec Ops: The Line*. The game has great landscape graphics and is set in a post-apocalyptic Dubai. The game uses the contemporary iconic architectural skyline of Dubai and its most dramatic interiors. It takes place in the near future in a Dubai cut off from the outside world after a ravaging series of cataclysmic sandstorms.”

“In the trailer, the sandstorms have deposited sand, ten to twenty meters deep across all of Dubai. Here and there the overhead monorail tracks connecting their metallic, armadillo shaped, futuristic stations just barely poked out of the sands. Some windswept dunes had grown upwards of seventy meters. More than thirty meters of sand had covered all of the Palm Jumeirah Island, completely connecting its entirety with the mainland.”

“The iconic Atlantis arch, the previous landmark tip of the Palm Jumeirah, was more than 50% buried. It had a '*Planet of the Apes*' look...you know, that bit when Charlton Heston discovers the very top of the Statue of Liberty, the rest of the statue hidden, buried in sand. That’s what the Atlantis arch looked like, buried in sand. Anyhow, the trailer story moved in and out of these magnificent five star hotel lobbies, Atlantis, Burj Dubai, Burj Khalifa, all broken down, and filled with drifted sand. The few remaining people scoured these places for water, food and shelter.”

Chalmers added, “In a sense, that game sounds like a testimony to Dubai’s contemporary cultural cachet. This place is a 21st century urban landmark in the making. Dubai, the place is alive--it is happening--it is fun. Hey, it is not perfect; but it has a positive buzz about it. People do not say the same about Abu Dhabi. You know, I visited Abu Dhabi twice, while I worked on Atlantis, and, frankly, Abu Dhabi looks like they’ve done nothing, nothing since the 1980s--maybe even gone downhill. The area known as Electra, right in the heart of downtown--it’s messy, congested, poorly kept up, degenerating before the eyes. And it is the newest part! Abu Dhabi has nothing like New Dubai. And the shopping malls, well, they are all--there is no other way to say it--they’re all so 1980s!”

Outside, the local weather, that strong *shamal* wind, which had been blowing out of the northwest was noticeably strengthening. Visibility was reducing. It made Jean-Claude's reference to the video game take on an eerie reality.

5.6: Desert Street Trees

T:03/11
KM-0037
06:12
24°53'22.29"N
54°56'05.50"E
EL:0002M

Winds and sand swept continuously. The weather, in combination with the landscape, overwhelmed. Urban development anomalies in this desert were embarrassingly exposed in this kind of weather. Driving along Sheik Zayed Road in the Emirate of Dubai, Chalmers observed a noteworthy absence of street trees. Without them, the winds and sand were flowing right across the road. After he and Jean-Claude passed the end of the huge Waterfront site, they entered the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Immediately street trees began; or, rather a sort of minimal shelterbelt planting began, two rows of trees up the median and four rows on either verge.

Jean-Claude offered historical background, "When you mentioned Electra and New Dubai, you hinted there might be some kind of competition between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. That is right. On every level there is competition between the two emirates, even street trees."

Jean-Claude continued, "Listen, throughout his life, Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi, the very same Emirati who united the Emirates in 1970, was a major supporter of the practical benefits of shade trees and fruit-bearing trees, especially date palms. So he chose the most useful and tough trees, *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Zizyphus spinus-christi*, *Prosopis cineraria*...and with supporting irrigation, planted them for desert shelterbelt buffers, along all major highways. And that, is what we are seeing out there, right now."

5.7: Al Qurm

T:04/11
KM-0077
06:50
24°37'15.75"N
54°42'59.13"E
EL:0014M

The wind buffeted their SUV as Chalmers and Jean-Claude passed the turn off for Yas Formula One Island and Sadiyat Island. Jean-Claude noted that those islands were only two of more than 200 islands in the Gulf that belonged to Abu Dhabi, then added, “Dubai has only the one artificial island, the Palm Jumeirah. While on the other hand, amongst Abu Dhabi’s 200 islands are exceptional environmental resources including large areas of sea grasses... extensive mangrove colonies...”

Chalmers interrupted, “Is this part of that competition thing again?”

“Precisely. In fact, offshore in the coastal Gulf, between the islands of Abu Dhabi, Yas and Sadiyat, there are nearly ten square kilometers of protected seagrass and mangrove habitat. We have joked about bantering between the ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. You should know they are historically linked. There is deep family history between Dubai and Abu Dhabi...Dubai is actually an off shoot, a scion from Abu Dhabi...a proudly independent scion, at that. Abu Dhabi not only has all the natural islands, it also has the vast majority of oil reserves, not Dubai. But, as you know from your Atlantis project, in this last big real estate development push, it was Dubai out of the gate first.”

Chalmers asked, “So I guess Yas Island Formula One and Sadiyat Island new town will be Abu Dhabi’s answer to Dubai’s most recent big development push over these past ten years?”

“Theoretically, Chalmers...though they are not built, yet. But getting back to the plants, to the local ethnobotany, there is debate about whether, in this expansive mangrove colony originally, there was actually a mix of *Rhizophora mucronata* with *Avicennia marina*. Some say the last rhizophora were taken by man over 100 years ago.”

“Jean-Claude, can we please focus on the local human use instead of the academic debate regarding historical record?”

Jean-Claude continued, “Sure, sure...the *Avicennia marina*, or *al qurm* in Arabic, has the ethnobotanical presence in Emirati culture. The oldest, stoutest tree trunks were used in permanent settlements for beams over doors and windows. Young leaves were used as fodder and branches were used to make charcoal. There is one more use of *Avicennia*...which I find very interesting though I doubt you will...the *al qurm*, has always been used, across this region, as an aphrodisiac...”

Chalmers patiently said, “Tell me.”

“Listen, Yemen has long been well known for its honey, especially along the Wadi Du’an, in the Hadramaut region near the Omani border. A couple years ago, my last time in Yemen, speaking with farmers who collected honey in the Wadi Du’an, I heard this story. They told me about their relatives and their special *al qurm* honey.”

“The story went something like this,” he started. “The particular Wadi Du’an families, originally came from and still had relatives on Al Urj Island, just north of the Bab el Mandeb, where the Red Sea meets the Gulf of Aden, the region near Eritrea and Djibouti. The island has the oldest known mangrove colony in the entire Arabian Peninsula region. Their relatives, gathered honey from those mangroves, an almost, too pungent honey. Their Al Urj relatives sent the *al qurm* honey to them, which they mixed 1:10 with their own Wadi Du’an honey, a sweet and very popular local honey, coming from the *sidr*, the *Zizyphus spinus christi*.”

This was Jean Claude at his best, geography, landscape, humans and plants, he got into it. These were the stories in which Chalmers might find project worthy nuggets.

“Here is how they told it to me. The Al Urj Yemenis describe the scent of the *al qurm*, the mangrove flower, and its effect...in the springtime, in the still early morning hours, soon after the sun has risen, just as it has begun to heat the earth, men should go, during low tide, out amidst the oldest mangroves, those in full and healthy flower...inhale deeply, two, three, four times...take the air, the uniquely pungent medicinal fragrance, the scent, fully and deeply into the lungs. Absorb it. Relax into it. Meditate, if you will, on it. You will feel then, an utterly unique internal movement, a stirring...as a subtle energy, via hormonal penetration deep, in a man’s scrotum, the testes, then comes alive with, the primal force. It is nature’s own way to assure that the men can, even under the most difficult conditions of subsistence, propagate their species.”

Chalmers, halfway in humor, but not really sure, had to intervene, “Now Jean-Claude, you are not about to tell me, are you, that these men from Al Urj, walk around with flagpoles stout every spring, are you?”

“No, no, no, Chalmers. It is not a coarse, brute force effect like contemporary sildenafil citrate, Viagra, if you will. Rather, it is quite subtle. Its gentle stirring assures, that all internal supplies, equipment and connections, are ready for the time when required. I’ll tell you it is definitely performance guaranteed. Its results are there to see.

The Yemenis claim that this nectar of life has the power to strengthen a man's desire. In Arabic, the Al Du'an guys told me that this honey makes a man like a palm tree...one male can pollinate one hundred females. And honestly," Jean-Claude attested, "there are lots of families in that region with ten or more kids."

Chalmers jumped in again, "Excuse me, but with four wives, ten kids is not really a big deal."

"Chalmers, that is ten kids per wife. Now, if you will kindly, let me get to the punch line, please. The bees gather this *al qurm* nectar. The Yemenis harvest it for use in their blended honey, and they sell it, in certain stores, here in the UAE, always, always with the condition, displayed in large letters, all capitalized, on the face of each bottle, 'FOR MARRIEDS ONLY'."

"Ok, ok, I'm convinced, where can I buy some? Do you have a case in the trunk?"

5.8: Carbon Credits

T:05/11
KM-0095
08:00
24°29'04.25"N
54°38'35.52"E
EL:0006M

Chalmers and Jean-Claude passed the Abu Dhabi International Airport. It looked like a small, regional airport compared to the sprawling Dubai DXB. Chalmers would get a better look at it the end of the week, if all went well. Via iChat, he and Madge had agreed about textiles that interested her in the region. So, end of this week--beginning of next, he was planning to fly out of Abu Dhabi to Singapore, to pick up some silk fabric for her. He was looking forward to that.

Just after the airport, they passed the highly publicized Masdar, carbon-neutral, new town project. First thing in the morning, at least fifteen construction cranes were already operating. Tent-shaded construction trailer offices were already busy with managers, consultants, contractors, and foreign entrepreneurs. Chalmers quietly thought of carbon credit selling and trading--and all the media and science confusion over this issue now.

Jean-Claude shared with Chalmers that recently in the local newspapers, he had read that the original scale and pace of the modern, zero-carbon-footprint, medina of Masdar, being built for 60,000 people, had been slowed to remove

most all residential and commercial work. The only construction work being funded, going forward, would be the renewable resource institute.

Chalmers asked, “What do you think, might this project go the same way, just disappear like Nakheel’s Waterfront?”

Jean-Claude responded, “The Emiratis’ reputation is exposed here. Even though the science of global warming by man seems to have been tilted for political agendas, the development of renewable resource energy alternatives to oil does have legs. The Masdar Initiative, and their research arm, the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology, are a great human endeavor. The Emiratis are committed.”

5.9: Sabka Groundcovers

T:06/11
KM-0125
08:30-09:00
24°19'21.09"N
54°35'18.60"E
EL:0007M

Megalopolis--there is a linear megalopolis well underway in the UAE along The Gulf coast. Just across the border from the Omani Musandam Peninsula, this developing megalopolis begins with the Ras Al Khaimah municipality in the north east and, arguably in the not too distant future, will be a solid 230 kilometers southwest to the Abu Dhabi municipality.

Departing the Abu Dhabi Municipality, about halfway through their transect, Chalmers and Jean-Claude were leaving the UAE megalopolis. They were approaching the Gweifat Road, the land route, the always crowded truck route to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and beyond, to Europe.

Until now, the entire way, any unbuilt coastal edge had been low undulating sand, of a whitish grey taupe color, or *sabka*, as it is known--today a wind whipped, white dust. It is found at the lowest elevations, at just about sea level, crusted with salt, because of the high water table and its concurrent high salinity. The subtle sand ridges in between the *sabka* flats were home to the most tolerant of the halophytes⁵.

Jean-Claude had done some bio-saline research and keenly shared with Chalmers, “I know landscape architects are always looking for ground cover

⁵ Halophytes are plants that are extremely tolerant of high salt conditions in soil, water and air.

plants that know how to keep their place. If I remember, there is an over-reliance on established ornamental ground covers like the over watered *Wedelia* and *Sesuvium*--both aggressive, high maintenance plants, right? Well, some of the native halophytes in *sabka* regions have excellent landscaping potential. The best are in the Chenopod family, including the species, *Arthrocnemum* and *Halopeplis*. They would make great ground covers and would survive on the high total dissolved solids of saline irrigation water.”

Chalmers seconded that and asked, “Jean-Claude, do you know if any local nurseries have started to work with these potential ground covers, yet?”

“I doubt it. Local nurseries, private and government, are a bit behind in technology, processes, and quality control. I’m sure you have already seen that before. Interest in native shrubs and ground covers has not become a focussed, research issue yet, what to speak of a profit center. But an Australian chap told me that in some of Sheik Zayed’s original street tree nurseries, managers were starting to look into it, making some attempts at mass propagation. But they are really old school, flood irrigation, you know--difficult interfaces for the kind of work you do, Chalmers.”

Just before they turned onto the Gweifat Road, Jean-Claude pulled into a gas station. The last, he pointed out, before Hameem in Liwa. Along with charged up cell phones and full spare tires, essential for this trip were topped up oil, gas and water. They filled up, paid at the pump, then parked, and went into the ‘7-11’ type, modern snack shop. The shop and its toilets were built as an integral part of the gas station, very modern America in layout and style. Here, they are run by government gas companies, and open 24/7/365. Inside, they grabbed a bunch of half liter bottles of drinking water.

At the checkout cash register, next to the chewing gum, there was a small box of individually shrink-wrapped sticks. The box was labeled in Arabic only. Each stick was thick as a fat pencil, a bit irregular though, not straight as an arrow, and about fifteen centimeters long. Chalmers asked Jean-Claude, “What are these? I’ve never seen them in Carrefour⁶, or any of the other food stores in Dubai. Now don’t get onto any ethnobotanical STD stuff, eh, just give me a straight answer!”

“They are *mishwak*, Chalmers--toothbrushes, from twigs or roots of the *Salvadora persica*. That’s about as exotic as it gets. Though not a native to the UAE, this good size shrub is definitely endemic, tolerates drifting sand like a champ--you’d

⁶ Carrefour is a French chain of large stores, not dissimilar from Walmart in scope of merchandise. In the UAE, they serve as magnets for most of the expatriate communities, European, Arab and Asian.

like it--it is fresh green year round. As a tooth cleaner, it has a tradition in the Arabian Peninsula, back at least as far as the coming of Islam. They are widely used in Africa, and on the Indian sub-continent, too.”

Chalmers chuckled and asked, “But, do they work? And, if they do, for five dirhams each, they might well be worth it.”

“Do they work, you ask? As you might figure, some alternative scientists and herbalists encourage their use--instead of toothbrushes--but, do they work? Try them out yourself--but, make sure to visit your dentist in six months!”

Gas tank filled, they had only a short thirty kilometers along the coast on the Gweifat Road until the Hameem turnoff. Visibility had decreased because of the *shamal*; but the roadside could still be seen. According to the Google Earth images, Chalmers had figured that after the Hameem turnoff, they would see no more coastal scrub or *sabka*, just Empty Quarter dunes. He had calculated a straight shot south of about 130 kilometers from the coast to Hameem. About halfway there they would cross the Tropic of Cancer.

EPISODE 6: RUB AL KHALI INLAND

6.1: Desert Sirens

T:07/11
KM-0169
09:30
24°08'59.05"N
54°14'23.12"E
EL:0003M

If there could be a twilight zone, an X-files event on this trip, this next area would be the setting. Chalmers and Jean-Claude appeared to leave contact with civilization behind when they took the Hameem turnoff south. There was no other traffic. The road was well asphalted, two lanes, one in each direction and two full asphalt shoulders. The verges on each side had the Sheik Zayed tree plantations, as always, laid out linearly in agricultural fashion. These trees were young, in their first two or three years. More noteworthy though, was the desert, it was stirred, riled, mad with wind. Reduced visibility now limited their maximum speed to less than 70kph.

Jean-Claude said, "Over nearly a year when I was regularly making this trip, I may have seen only two or three *shamal* storms like this. Most of the time, I could enjoy the alluring forms of these dunes...on each dune your eyes could discover feminine curves...the feminine curves that throughout time have melted man's intelligence...where the turn of the waist sweeps into the hip... and the hip line so gracefully slides into the thigh...and on and on...from every angle to every eye...these timeless curves call out from each dune, like a siren to Odysseus...no, stronger still the call...from the dune landscape is a harem of siren calls...each beautiful, sweet, alluring...all promising...exquisite satisfactions...fulfillments of secret..."

"Ok, ok, steady on!" Chalmers butted in, before Jean-Claude got carried away any further. "Pull back a bit, because we have a real weather event today. The desert is threatening like the wildest ocean storm. This wind is whipping--scrambling the landscape, like a roaring hurricane but without rain, without humidity--just furious wind, furious sand!"

The sun was a dim disk--by the storm nearly blotted out of the sky. Their visibility was reduced to less than 200 meters and the sand was swirling, drifting, dancing and racing over the asphalt. As they drove on the previous mini dunes of the *sabka* coast grew larger, and each dune, being forcefully reshaped by the relentless *shamal* wind, had a roaring top.

After driving with buffeting winds and poor visibility for an arduous seventy kilometers, they came to the first paved intersection, of sorts. It had barely readable signs for oil and gas rigs--Asab to the west--Saafi Al Naar, in the direction of the Saudi and Omani borders thirty four kilometers to the east. They could see just by the side of the road, a small one story white stucco building. Stopped in front of the building, on the road shoulder were seven or eight large, heavy duty construction hauling trucks, their warning blinkers flashing, because of the sandstorm poor visibility.

Chalmers and Jean-Claude stopped, too.

6.2: Lunch on the Spice Route

T:08/11
KM-0231
10:30-11:30
23°39'38.93"N
54°24'03.13"E
EL:0102M

The building was a truck stop and it's name was the Howeiteen Restaurant. Chalmers and Jean-Claude were happy to be inside away from the storm. The cheaply built structure, housing the restaurant cum snack shop, was about six meters wide by fifteen meters long. It was not particularly well lighted, a line of single fluorescent tubes strung across the length of the ceiling--the weak lighting exaggerated by darkness from the sandstorm outside.

At the front door, behind a small counter, sat an attendant and two coolers--candy bars, pop and water in the coolers--potato chips and other dry pre-packaged nibble stuff at the counter. On the far end, a small open kitchen was steaming with the first meal of the day--large pots over gas fires, tended by a cook, and a helper. In the center were eight small one meter by one meter tables, each with four chairs, all for eating guests. Only two tables were free. The guys already eating all had traditional Pakistani clothes, loosely fitting cotton *shalwar kameez*, either white or beige color. Chalmers called them, Pakjamas, because they looked like pajamas. But actually, they were quite effective and efficient clothes, for the salary, the climate, and the work involved.

It was nearing 11AM, they had left without any breakfast. So, for eight dirhams each, they sat down at one of the empty tables to biryani and chai⁷ latte.

⁷ There is a place in the world where the word for tea is overtaken by chai, perhaps, population wise, the largest part of the world, that part within about 10 hours of flying time from the edges of the Indian subcontinent.

Immediately, the cook's helper brought out two huge plates of steaming hot, freshly made chicken biryani.

In between spoonfuls, Chalmers tried to identify the component spices in the biryani aroma, "Cardamon, cumin, cloves--even today the historical traces of the Spice Route, resonate in the local cuisine. This was the Spice Route, right?"

Jean-Claude recalled, "You're right. I am sure you remember, the so-called Spice Route had many paths...coming from the Far East, one bounced along all the ports of the Southern Arabian Peninsula, then to East Africa, or, to the Red Sea, Cairo, the Med, and...another turned up and through the Strait of Hormuz...all were always in contact with what we today call, the United Arab Emirates."

"Cardamon, cumin, cloves..." he continued. "They are common in the market place and in restaurants here as spices...likely some of the pervasive first aromas that will distinguish any store, street or restaurant in the UAE as exotic to a first time Western visitor. Cardamon, from the ginger family, came originally from the sub-continent. *Elettaria cardamomum* is an herbaceous perennial with all parts heavily aromatic. But commercially these days, this green cardamom may be coming from Central America. Cloves, one of the originals long ago from the Spice Islands, Indonesia and now the sub-continent, *Syzygium aromaticum*, comes from an evergreen, smallish tree...but neither one of these, cloves or cardamon, can grow nicely in this climate."

Chalmers, already well and truly into his biryani, found the sauce was highly spiced, curry-like with potatoes and onions dominating, with just enough bits of chicken, and pleasantly sweetened by a couple small pieces of chopped dates. It didn't take long for either of them to finish.

After draining his little six ounce thin plastic cup of chai latte, Chalmers asked, "Except the two over there with messy red hair--and red beards, most of these Pakistani truck drivers, eating here, have big, bushy, black beards. Among the

Arabs a big bushy beard and a short thobe⁸, most dependably denote, fundamentalist leanings, *Wahabi*⁹ tendencies. Is it the same with these guys?”

Jean-Claude chuckled, “No, no, no...big, bushy beards are just manly. It may be likely that they are Shia, if anything. I noticed at least one black cloth, tied to a side view mirror on one of the trucks...a common sign that the driver is Shia. Oh, and the ones with red hair...those are Pashtuns, Afghans, many of whom traditionally henna their hair and beards.”

Jean-Claude continued, “These guys, they are living their dream! They are here driving big diesels...Mercedes, Volvo, huge trucks! If they are lucky even a heavy duty Kenworth...you’ll see some of them wearing NASCAR caps. Even some of the Emiratis wear NASCAR caps, with their *kandouras*, their thobes. Among Muslims, the diversity of belief and culture is very broad.”

Chalmers said, “I’ve done a fair amount of reading and isn’t it funny how all the Muslims seemed to get easily lumped together into one anonymous group, when in reality they have continuously evolving internal strife, regarding interpretations of what Islam does or does not include...disputes argued in detail, tracking back centuries with references and interpretations! What to speak of these contemporary pop culture overlays like, NASCAR!”

Jean-Claude advised, “But even an appreciation of that diversity, and the deeply historical, internal squabbling, should not reduce, I repeat, should not reduce the Western world wariness, regarding the rise and presence of Muslim faithful in their countries.”

“So,” Chalmers asked, “you, too, see this ‘new politically correct tolerance’ in the West, as a weakness that could be exploited in the centuries old battle between Muslims and Christians?”

“Why not? Read the Koran...and after all, who has the water and who has the fertile land?”

When Jean-Claude finished his chai latte, they both got up and went to the counter to pay. While paying, each bought a *mishwak* and smiling and satisfied,

⁸ A thobe is a *thawb* in Arabic, and in common parlance can also be called *dishdasha* or *kandoura* depending on country and with whom you speak. It is an ankle length garment, most likely white and cotton in the summer, tan or beige and wool in winter, worn by Arab Muslim men throughout the Arabian peninsula.

⁹ A Wahabi is a member of a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect with its roots in central Saudi Arabia from the approximately mid eighteenth century.

noted that the toothbrush cost just about as much as the lunch itself. They were ready to go.

But as Jean-Claude and Chalmers stepped outside again, the ripping, wind-blown sand, savagely scoured their faces, their necks, any exposed skin. Getting back inside their vehicle was a huge relief. They paused to imagine what the experience of this storm would have been, had they been traveling only by foot, or camel? Unimaginable! How does one hunker down in this kind of debilitating sandblast? How can one find shelter to outlast these storms of twelve to seventy two hours!?

They pushed on. The trip was taking much longer than they had calculated. They continued toward Hameem. The young trees on the road side were bending over, taking it, overwhelmed by this raging sand storm. Sand was drifting right through the plantations to the road edge--over the road--everywhere.

Chalmers asked, "You said you saw two or three storms like this before? It looks like these roads will have to be plowed or swept. If not, a couple storms like this and the road would just, disappear!"

"Depends on how long the storm lasts. Sometimes after a short NW *shamal*, the weather changes and a system establishes the secondary prevailing wind, out of the SE for a couple days, and that will clean up a lot of it. Other times, I have seen maintenance work done by front end loaders and trucks in order to keep the right of way clear. They do what has to be done to keep the road open."

Buffeting, drifting, kilometer after kilometer the same continued...buffeting...drifting.

6.3: 23°26'00.00"N/Tropic of Cancer

T:09/11
KM-0254
12:00
23°26'00.00"N
54°23'27.91"E
EL:0121M

It was a push; but Chalmers and Jean-Claude drove on. In a wild weather landscape, they crossed the Tropic of Cancer, an imaginary line, noteworthy only, as an intellectual exercise on their GPS.

"No signs, no markings," commented Chalmers.

Jean-Claude clarified, “I am sure you know, Chalmers, the geodesy and survey science behind the location. The position of the Tropic of Cancer is not fixed. Its position varies in a very complicated manner over time. It is one of those measurements that when the science behind it is unbundled, the uncertainties and anomalies, in our understanding of planetary movement, are laid bare.”

“I expected you to tell me the reason why there are no markings--something like since the location of the tropics was calculated by non-Muslims and therefore blah, blah, blah!”

“You know as well as I, engineering and math are engineering and math--everybody needs a little space from time to time!”

An hour into this part of the trip there seemed to be a lessening of the wind. The sand looked more a golden orange, than taupe; and the dunes were certainly higher. The sign post read five kilometers to Hameem. As the road bent to the west and descended, they saw in the distance the outlines of the fodder and date palm plantations, hints of the irrigated valley of Hameem. They were about to reach the eastern end of the Liwa Oasis.

Jean-Claude shared one legend about the Liwa Oasis and the tribe who inhabit it, as well as most of the Abu Dhabi Emirate, the *Bani Yas*. He explained, “The naming structure among the tribes is quite important. Descendants, from a famous man who has proven himself wise and strong, respect him by highlighting his name in their lineage when they give their own name. Emiratis listen quite closely to introductions from other Emiratis, because this structured name lineage tells about an individual’s heritage, ethics, and current potential, all in one.”

He continued with the example. “The legend goes that a certain man named *Yas* was the first to dig a well and assure dependable water in the Liwa Oasis. The importance of this remains clear centuries later, as an entire very large tribe is known as the people of *Yas*, the *Bani Yas*.”

Jean-Claude shared further, “The wells in each and every valley of this Liwa Oasis have been slowly established by trial and error over time...even as little as 200 meters between wells can make the difference in the water suitability for agriculture. The residents take relatively sweet water from the first twenty five meter depth to grow fodder for camels and goats, minimal human subsistence when the season permits and their specialty, date palms. And you might be interested to know that they grow some really nice date varieties...*Khallas, Bou Maan, Al Nukhba*...”

“...which reminds me...about four or five years ago, I visited the Liwa Date Festival in Mazaira. The main event at the festival was a date competition. The competition was according to variety...for the combined best looking, and best tasting, *ritab* dates. *Ritab* dates are half ripe. They have not been dried. They are different from what we always see in the stores, the *tumur*, or fully ripe, which have always been cut and dried for a time, as part of the full ripening process. For *ritab*, one half is so very light, moist, tender...it has a ‘melt in your mouth’ sweetness...while the other half, the stem half of the date is not yet ripe...it is a crunchy fibrous texture...and, like a green banana, not sweet at all in taste.”

Chalmers asked, “Would those *ritab* dates be in texture like the soft, large and expensive *Medjoul* dates, often found in boutique grocery stores around the world?”

“No, no, no, Chalmers, not at all. Those are *tumur*. These Liwa Oasis *ritab* were soft as warm butter and their sweetness...beyond words.”

“...let me continue, Chalmers, please...the competition presentation required that the *ritab* dates be displayed in baskets, baskets woven in patterns using date palm frond leaflets. Very basic, very fundamental, the presentations were resilient with a humble farmer pride. It was fun...an excellent exhibition of agriculture and craft skills, all by Liwa Emiratis. I saw it as a demonstration that even under these incredibly harsh environmental conditions, the residents proudly shared an ethnobotanical pride.”

“I never heard of anything about that, or any Emirati ethnobotany during my two years on the Atlantis Project in Dubai. There, on that project, the intent was to build a stage set, a place to overwhelm guests, a fantasy land--the entire opposite to your date festival, ours was a place, to suspend disbelief--and it worked for that.”

“But, I need to make a point here. I have some doubts. This shared ethnobotanical root is difficult. On the one hand, if it truly is part of an historically shared pride, I can see its value, it’s almost essential presence not to be lost, but,” suggested Chalmers, “sometimes, sometimes I wonder if this idea of communicating ethnobotanical heritage through contemporary landscape design is a bit too much of a stretch--you know, with a kind of nasty commercial exploitation, where it can easily turn into a ‘Disneyland recollection’! Or worse still, there can be a co-opting of ethnobotanical tradition resulting in a flim-flam sales pitch for approval! And regarding garden and landscape heritage, don’t you find it strange, putting humans aside, how the landscape, itself, has its own ways of visually erasing the past--replacing the past, simply with the passage of time?”

Jean-Claude replied, “Look, somebody has to bring that ethnobotanical knowledge and history to the table in landscape discussions...at least for consideration. If not, then public realm landscaping and associated gardens would become just another appliqué, like you say...nothing more than just another fashion...just a piece of throwaway costume jewelry, showing no respect for other life forms, other life forms sharing this strange experience of life with us on this planet we call Earth. We do owe some respect, in my opinion.”

Chalmers mused, “But, isn’t it also silly, even absurd, to try to freeze frame an historical garden or landscape. You know, don’t you think it’s absurd to make a garden like a museum exhibit, when the essence of all plant growth is change over time? Sometimes it seems to me that costume jewelry--temporary--throw away--that is all it is--and maybe that is right. It is already a significant sign of affluence when we can not have any worry for subsistence, and plant gardens only for beauty.”

The dunes along the roadside had become quite a bit larger, showing stronger reds. Visibility into the landscape had improved, and the wind continued to weaken. After much uncertainty, much rough treatment by the Empty Quarter landscape, they had finally arrived at Hameem.

6.4: Hameem

T:10/11
KM-0310
13:15
22°56'42.78"N
54°17'09.76"E
EL:0097M

An oasis without romance, Hameem was barely an agricultural town, really just an agricultural village. Everything looked rough. Sitting in a *sabka* valley, Hameem, surrounded by dunes, and filled with scruffy looking date palm orchards, had about twenty simple, white, one story, recently government constructed houses, a mosque, a feed store, a grocery store with restaurant and a gas station. That was it. That was all. Chalmers and Jean-Claude filled up at the gas station. The gas station, no modern 7-11 out here, no snacks, toilet out back, they were in the southwest American boondocks, early 1950s style.

Not far from the gas station, on the roadside, about one hundred meters away, they found the CTF Liwa Qsar project construction panel sign which marked the final turn to access the project.

“Well, Jean-Claude,” Chalmers started, “this is where we both begin a road, previously traveled by neither of us!”

“Not only that,” Jean-Claude added, as they turned off the main road, “it looks, like it will no longer be paved.” He slowed down, shifted the Land Cruiser into four wheel drive, and began their new direction on their last leg due south into the Empty Quarter.

To reach the Liwa Qsar project destination, they still had to go another twelve or so kilometers. But, from now on it would be via a compacted, soft, gatch¹⁰ material construction haul road--a very heavily used dusty road which was constantly being wetted down and re-compacted by large construction water tankers. Right at the entry, they passed a huge pumping station and its auxiliary buildings, certainly for potable water. Along the haul road was an ongoing parallel excavation and installation of underground electrical supply cables, being fed from trailers, on which sat coiled cable on huge wooden spools. These were the permanent main electrical supply cables for the project. Lots of activity happening everywhere.

Carefully, they pushed on. The construction road was barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass. Heavy road graders were working behind the water trucks to make sure the road had no ruts, to make sure the sand dunes did not reclaim the road. Progress forward was slow. The gatch construction road wound around huge dunes, separated by undeveloped dune *sabka* valleys. In all the twisting and turning, they lost count of the dunes; but they did notice a distinct lessening of the wind. With the lessening of the wind, the visibility gradually improved. Winding around and through, yet one more series of dunes, Jean-Claude noticed, “What is that, down in that valley on the left?”

Chalmers looked, “That looks like a labor camp--looks like forty foot containers--maybe a couple hundred of them--each has windows in the sides and each window has an air conditioner--no additional shade at all--yeah, that’s a labor camp.”

Once they passed the project labor camp and rounded one more huge dune, they reached the project security gate.

¹⁰ Gatch is a fine texture local limestone material that when wetted down holds its form and is suitable for regular truck haul road travel during construction. Nevertheless, it has to be regularly maintained, repaired, wetted down and graded to be effective. When it dries out and is not maintained, it becomes part of the desert sand and can be just as treacherous for driving.

There was a barrier across the road, a temporary hut, and what looked like a team of four or five security guards, opening and closing the barrier. There was a scrum of trucks of all sizes and purposes. The roadside was temporary parking anarchy. Both entering and leaving, every vehicle's driver had to stop, get out of the vehicle and go inside the hut to exchange passes and IDs. There was a swarm of men outside the door to the hut trying to get in, rustling with others trying to get out. The security guards did not have control on this day.

Chalmers showed a guard, the CTF pass given to him by Theuns. The guard checked and noted the license plate number, BKV 974¹¹, then waved him through. Chalmers and Jean-Claude had escaped that mashup. They continued on, and passing around another large dune, they finally saw the construction site.

6.5: Destination 5-Star

T-11/11END
KM-0319
13:55
22°53'42.96"N
54°20'28.44"E
EL-0126M

It might as well have been a big budget movie set. The site was bustling. On the east end of the huge dune truncated valley, the Liwa Qsar building construction was shaped like a large horseshoe, opened to the west. Sitting well above the valley floor, the stepped buildings comprising the horseshoe shape, tucked into lower dune side slopes. The steepest and tallest dune was immediately on the right, the north side, and in full view from the construction. The dune dominated this end of the valley. This huge dune rose steeply, 300 meters up from the *sabka* valley floor.

This Empty Quarter landscape setting and well blended buildings reminded Chalmers a bit of southern Morocco, where the Draa and Todra rivers descend from the Atlas mountains into the Sahara desert. In the Moroccan town of Ouarzazate, the Taourirt Casbah was the most often photographed Atlas *qsar* town--perhaps a bit more high rise, perhaps a bit more compact than this new project. Both of them, the Quarzazate Qsar and this Liwa Qsar, by their form, and substantial ramparts, provided protection. But here, unlike southern Morocco, there were no rivers in the valleys. Here, there was complete absence of surface water, absence of palms, absence of trees, absence of any noticeable green, any recognizable plants.

¹¹ BVK 974 is the Blues Brothers' Police car license plate number.

With thousands of laborers at work, the 150 room hotel and fifty villas were in the peak of construction activity, mostly without finishes. In a small section of the taller construction, a specialist theming plaster sub-contractor was putting on samples of the final finish, capturing the hue, the value and the texture of the surrounding sands. They had completed enough of a sample to enable Chalmers and Jean-Claude to imagine the final look. The sample blended in nicely.

The hotel main entry was obvious, because it was the only four and five story structure. It gently stepped down into attached three stories and down again to two stories. The hotel and all villas were surrounded and protected by *qsar* walls, massive ramparts clearly defining outside, the desert, from inside, the residences and gardens. Overall the visual image, the details, were traditional *qsar* fashion, buttressing the lowest levels, stepping up the side slopes of the dunes, and finishing on top with crenelated edges.

By now, the wind had significantly relented. They could see out into the desert landscape fairly well. They found a place free from the hubbub of site construction activities to pull over and pause, to look out over and down the valley. The calmer wind permitted them to look out, into the huge dune landscape, using a different magnification, to focus in on the *sabka* valley, and the extensive sweeping dunes framing it.

During the construction process, this stunning natural valley had been protected. It was clear why the site was chosen, and why the buildings had been placed where they were. The composition and grandeur of this large landscape of valley, dunes and sky, could only be done justice by a photographer with the vision and skills of Ansel Adams, or a cinematographer like David Lean's Freddie Young. That was the view being protected for all guests.

The valley stretched and wriggled out for more than a kilometer, maybe two. The wind storm no longer a factor, Chalmers and Jean-Claude climbed out of their SUV and looked carefully up the valley and dune landscape. They saw desert detail for the first time. The huge dunes in front of them stretched further than they could see; but they could see on closer inspection, sinuously sweeping over the valley floor, small, graceful, long and thin, dune fingerlettes, each only a meter or two high. These dune fingerlettes had been aligned by the opposing prevailing NW and SE winds. There was no creek, no wadi¹², no flow line on the valley floor, just random depressions, shifting hollows, created by these ever moving, slowly evolving, serpentine dune fingerlettes. Winds

¹² A wadi is a dry river or creek bed that only flows when there is significant rainfall.

reshaped them. Stills revealed their small scale, their transient beauty. On their surfaces could be read the transitory language of the fauna.

Upon careful exploration, Jean-Claude and Chalmers, straining, could see on the gentle undulations of these red desert, sand dune fingerettes, and in their hollows, growing randomly, small, fine textured, green mounds, most likely, *Zygophyllum sp.*, never taller than fifty centimeters high--scattered, discrete, sparsely, very sparsely distributed. They could be seen in various ages from young to juvenile, to mature, to senile. Their entire life cycle was there to view, in one look. Jean-Claude had seen them before and added, "Regardless of the shifting sands, their tap roots take advantage of the groundwater up to three meters below the valley floor."

Jean-Claude wanted to walk the valley. He was looking for desert roses¹³ and fire plants, *Leptodenia pyrotechnica*, rarely seen in the Western Region, two meter tall loosely branched shrub clumps, often used for shelter by desert gazelles. And Chalmers, he was late. He had to get started with his meetings. They found the Site Construction Offices, parked their SUV, climbed out, stretched, then on foot, went their own ways.

¹³ Desert roses are rose petal shapes found in the sand. They occur when moisture and sufficient gypsum or barite are found in the sand. Finding one is like finding a four leaf clover.

EPISODE 7: LIWA QSAR

Rudyard Kipling, knowledgeable of the Asian landscapes and their peoples, wrote:
This is a world of danger to honest men.

7.1: The Dream

In the West, the Empty Quarter has always been an elusive, an ambiguous froth, yet a strangely arid froth--whispering mystery and romance, providing an oddly attractive whiff from an evanescent bouquet of promise. That is the mirage; and Chalmers hoped that Liwa Qsar would be different.

Spectacular red sunsets rewarded the end of every day. The project site was chosen to give the guests a luxury room looking west at a view framed by some of the largest and steepest red sand dunes in the Empty Quarter. The project was about providing shelter, a comfortable, an elegant shelter, protecting from the uncertainties, from the threats in this beautiful landscape.

Today Chalmers would meet the key players, the key players constructing an iconic resort in the arid, inland, heart of the Empty Quarter, living and working in this sweaty 50°C¹⁴ world.

7.2: Kelvin Isley

Chalmers normally had little problem distinguishing between dreams, imagination and the real time requirements of building large, complex projects. But, today's shamal had unsettled him. The drive to the project had loosened his focus, and there was an awkward aura beginning to emanate from this landscape. He was glad to be on the job site. He took shelter of what he knew, embedding himself in the reality of the construction process.

Chalmers first appointment on site was with Kelvin Isley, the CTF Hospitality Director. Kelvin was the final responsible, as Client representative on site, to make sure that all construction happened to technical standard, to quality expectations and on time.

Kelvin was from New Zealand. He followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and great uncle, who had spent much of their professional careers in the Middle East and North Africa. Kelvin stood a tallish six foot two, and weighed a fit 185 pounds. He had a friendly face. He was a direct man who knew not only how

¹⁴ 50° Celsius equals 122° Fahrenheit. Human body temperature is 37° Celsius or 98.6° Fahrenheit.

to listen, but also how to command, and control to get the required results for successful complex hospitality projects in challenging locations.

Kelvin had obviously sun sensitive skin with a ruddy, splotchy complexion. His blondish hair looked like the sun was bleaching it, burning it off. But despite those sensitivities, he had an ingrained natural fitness. His natural fitness was the result of a childhood hiking in the New Zealand countryside, which built his life long capacity for endurance.

His father had been Research Director in the New Zealand Department of Conservation, Southland Region. Kelvin grew up in Invercargil. His father made sure Kelvin knew like his own back yard, the Routeburn and Milford Tracks. And his father always took him to Maori meetings, where Kelvin absorbed the traditional insights these men had learned from the landscape.

He was a well organized Type-A personality, and made good intuitive reads on people's personalities and their issues, in relation to the goals and objectives of the project. He worked twelve to fourteen hours a day at Liwa, and, still had weekend time for his wife and two young kids in Abu Dhabi.

While in the Empty Quarter, here and there each week, he hiked down into the *sabka* valleys and up along the dune ridges. Whenever he found a free moment on-site, he set out to know this unusual landscape by first hand experience.

He channeled the right side of his brain, listened to the Empty Quarter, heard the Empty Quarter, and became one with it. Over time, this had enabled him insightful observations on the life forces in the desert, plants, animals, humans. He had come to know the *rimal* rhythm, the sands rhythm of the heat. And, he had become an amateur of traditional Arabic desert poetry in the form known as *Nabati*¹⁵.

Chalmers found him outdoors in the midst of an impromptu on site construction meeting. Chalmers introduced himself. Kelvin asked for a couple minutes to finish up his meeting and then walked with Chalmers to CTF's site office. On the edge of a large clustered grid of site construction offices, Kelvin's office was upstairs, in one of the two story stacked pre-fab modules. Inside, Kelvin offered a chair. Chalmers sat down and observed two noteworthy things on the walls, a series of large satellite images of the site, labelled, taken monthly, and a set of A0 size schedules of program versus actual--bar charts, depicting all

¹⁵ Nabati is poetry, sometimes known as people's poetry or Bedouin poetry. It has its roots in the Arabian Peninsula and its own oral tradition.

site construction and material procurement activities, updated weekly, and heavily marked up with notes.

As Kelvin sat down at his desk, Chalmers noticed a carved piece of rough wood, displayed like a name plate plaque on the desk. It looked like a piece of an old, gnarly prosopis trunk, with one side cut smoothly, planed and engraved. It was a quotation, from Algernon Blackwood, and read:

*...the desert slipped in, through wall, and ceiling,
rising from beneath, settling about us
...listening, pressing, waiting...*

Chalmers did not have time to think about it because, Kelvin handed him a half litre bottle of water and asked, “How can I help you?”

Chalmers thanked Kelvin for his time, and explained, “Theuns asked me to get this landscape consultant and contractor team together, have you been briefed?”

“Certainly have Chalmers, and I’d be glad to help if you need anything. We have six months to soft opening and no softscape action at all.”

“Yup, that’s my task, Kelvin. I do have two questions. First, I am going to be working directly with the landscape contractor and consultant. Time being so short, I really don’t need or want to spend time with your contracted Project Management Team, unless you see essential value here on site. What do you say?”

“Chalmers, they’re paper pushers so just stop in and see me with updates as appropriate, ok? On the landscaping we need action, not talk.”

“Got it. Now second, I need to get with the General Contractor’s Construction Manager to get some details. Then I will work on down the chain of command. I told Theuns I would have an action plan by close of business this Thursday. So can you point me in the direction of the Construction Manager's office?”

“The General Contractor’s CM? That would be Bob Rosenwinkel. His office is in the construction trailer next door, upstairs. And Chalmers, please keep me in the picture with the same info you share with Theuns.” Then, pointing to some bright red highlighted bars, on the bar chart schedule behind his desk, Kelvin emphasized, “This landscaping is way behind.” Kelvin stood up as he finished speaking, looked out his window, southwest into the mid-afternoon sun and dune landscape.

Then he added, “By the way, I was just wondering...have you ever worked in these sand deserts before? Do you know what you are up against, Chalmers?”

Chalmers blinked as the almost rhetorical question settled in. He waited for Kelvin to turn around. Then he answered, “There is nothing that compares to the Empty Quarter, anywhere in the world. I am sure we can agree on that. I have built a couple very large projects here in the UAE, and worked on the edge of the Western Sahara before; and there is one rule that guides me...I can always learn more. So if you will, please take a minute and share the observations that help drive you to succeed in this landscape.”

Kelvin looked out the window again at the Empty Quarter landscape, and while he thought, Kelvin let silence control the room.

Then looking back at Chalmers, he shared, “There are 3,235 humans working out there today. They are housed and fully supplied with water and power, food, shelter and air conditioning. All of this we have done, we are doing in a landscape that for centuries, no for millennia, likely never had twenty five humans pass through it in a single year. Do you sense a disconnect?”

7.3: Morphogenetics

Kelvin Isley was intent on giving Chalmers a complete introduction to the Liwa Qsar project landscape. He continued his explanation of disconnects, “Contrary to the fine artwork, the craft of Western photographers and journalists, this landscape is first and foremost, not about beauty. It is about death, and, the daily battle for survival. Survival of the fittest. He who adapts, survives.”

Chalmers said, “I like the way you think. Historically, I understand this huge sand desert as a landscape of death; but in a contemporary sense, I am not so sure.”

“I am not surprised.” Kelvin said, “If you have another moment, I’ll tell you what happened to me.”

“What do you mean, Kelvin?”

“Listen Chalmers, I have been out here virtually every day for almost two years. I live out here in a trailer cabin, in an old date palm orchard where we have a management camp...there are about 125 cabins in the camp...and, by the way, if, as I imagine, you plan on being out here every day, I can arrange a cabin for you, too. No rush, we can arrange that later.”

“But listen, I have made it a point to confront this desert landscape head on. You need only walk across two dune ridges and you might as well be, 200 kilometers away from the nearest human, the nearest water...and, except for compass, which sometimes even loses its accuracy, and modern electronic wayfinding...there is 100% visual disorientation.”

Chalmers, showing interest in the story, looked inquisitively at Kelvin.

Kelvin continued, “I carry a GPS beacon. It is as important as water. I notify security in advance, and have an established check-in protocol, every three hours, when I explore on foot. That was my security...but that, is not the story.”

“Continue, Kelvin, tell me.”

“I’m convinced the desert is alive with some kind of continuously modulating, subtle energy. Anyone who has visited and carefully observed can easily ‘see’, its restlessness, its subtle rhythm. Photographs belie it. They invariably portray a dune as a stable, seductively shaped form, with which contemporary humans positively identify. It is the very still day that reveals, oh so subtly, its inherent energy...its own story. For me, it is very personal, very intimidating...very...I’ve concluded...otherworldly...yet, I’m really not sure.”

“You know, I walk these dunes night, day, sunrise, sunset, mid-day...it was the mid-day...but, it has happened more than once...”

“The ‘restlessness’ of the sands, creeps out very slowly and very subtly on still days...maybe like a ground hugging mist, on the moors, in northern England... you never see it actually emerge or any signs of it until its fingers are slowly wriggling along the surface...with purpose, or, without purpose...always unknown and unforeseen.”

“Scientists have made attempts to measure the subtlest changes in temperature...isotherms...and humidity and pressure isobars, to try to understand the subtle changes in conditions that immediately precede the visual presence of these smallest, serpentine, mist fingers, crawling ever so slowly along the surface of the ground...”

Chalmers interrupted, “The science is interesting Kelvin, but I do have to go...”

“Now, hang on, Chalmers, please, give me another minute. Last summer, I was out at mid-day, a still day, going up and down the dunes on foot. I paused over the edge of a dune hollow. The heat in mid-day does not come solely from the

sun above. It feels even more intense reflected up, off the sand. That is normal any day. But on that day, I was completely engulfed by the extreme dry heat from all directions...I could feel it, not just on my bare skin but, especially and, even through my boots...I could feel it like the smallest tentacles had emerged from, and swept over the sand to explore...they touched lightly at first... touching the soles of my feet...a pins-and-needles like feeling...then reaching, grasping, tickling, tingling, seemingly searching at my ankles...my feet were anchored in the sand...in the midst of trying to think through and analyze this feeling, I felt the pins-and-needles from those tentacles, reaching up my calves, exploring, grasping the sides of my knees...each touch...each tickle felt like a probe for an open door, a probe for an entry. Each place touched became hotter and hotter through gradients...not just that medicinal dry heat that many enjoy when they step outside of an air conditioned building into the desert heat...but a growing, a consuming heat that begs, at what point, does too hot become a burn?!"

"I felt the pins-and-needles at my knee joints and ligaments, many pinpoints, many tickles...many picks...many probes...time escaped me then...so many sensations consumed my senses...the next thing I knew, the increasing number of elongated tentacles and their searching, leading pins-and-needles points were grasping my thigh, and then at the inside of my thigh, toward where the leg meets the internal hip socket. It all was happening too fast. At the same time the pins-and-needles tentacles, the tingles, their grasp quickly found, wrapped and tightened on my scrotum...then my urethra, my anus...both simultaneously invaded...entry had been found...gates had been breached...my overloaded brain crashed...I collapsed."

"I must have lain in the sand for an hour because the next I remembered was the Security Team, their ATVs, the shade netting, the IV...helping me recover from heat prostration, that's what they called it, heat prostration, right in the hollow where I fell."

"What I sensed, and what I felt prior to losing consciousness left no bodily marks on me...was it some kind of primitive morphogenetic process in action? I don't know. But, while I still take my walks, the fear of an unknown now accompanies me out there...every time."

“Chalmers, you are a landscape man, let me suggest that before you finish this project, read from pre-Islamic sources, the *mu’allaqat*¹⁶, about desert *djinis*¹⁷. See what you can learn from Liwa inhabitants, about their interpretations of the *mu’allaqat*, and these strange sands. And the next time you see softly swirling sands in a gentle breeze, remember what has happened to me...remember those softly swirling sands may be bringing you more than beauty...”

Chalmers did not know what to believe from this well-anchored and surely dependable Kiwi. He had apparently been through some kind of macabre destabilization...some kind of surreal twilight zone, some kind of, what... landscape experience...and returned? Chalmers shuddered. He had to re-focus on the project.

“I’d like to explore this further with you, Kelvin, but right now, I need to see that Construction Manager, Rosenwinkel.”

7.4: Bob Rosenwinkel

Chalmers was chomping at the bit to meet with the Site Construction Manager. It was time to get this site situation into a proper project perspective.

The General Contractor’s top man, the Construction Manager, was an American, Bob Rosenwinkel. His office was upstairs in the two story stacked pre-fab construction offices. His attractive female South African secretary, seeing that Chalmers was with CTF, said, “The door is open, just go on in, no one else is with him now.”

Chalmers looked into the large room, about half the size of one full pre-fab, construction office module. It was four of five times larger than a standard site construction office. Bob Rosenwinkel, dressed in a golf shirt and golf trousers, looking all ready for the first tee, was standing behind his executive size desk looking out the large window at the construction site. The front half of the room had a large, rectangular meeting table with nine chairs. Against one side wall was an informal seating area, with two sofas and a generous size coffee table. Displayed on the coffee table were a selection of large format books, on Sanaa, on Persia, and, on the Arabian Peninsula. Then finally, in front of his desk sat three more chairs. With the presence of construction samples, mock ups, and models, with a just beneath the surface electric tension, and with the

¹⁶ Mu’allaqat is the title of a group of seven Arabic poems that preceded the coming of Islam. They were an oral tradition built in the desert of the Arabian Peninsula.

¹⁷ Djinis, plural of djin, Arabic for genies in English. Spiritual creatures who inhabit an unseen world in dimensions beyond that which are normally visible to humans.

smell of working men in the desert, the office looked and felt like a Construction Manager's site office. He was the man in charge.

But Rosenwinkel, Bob Rosenwinkel, his was a sad story. Bob Rosenwinkel was a Midwest American. Nearly five years ago, as his wife and two teenage daughters were on their way to visit him for the grand opening of a five star resort destination at Anguilla in the Caribbean, they disappeared. They were never found. They were presumed dead, when their private flight, from the last communication, apparently crashed. There were no survivors, no black box, no nothing. He has carried on.

At five foot nine, 240 pounds, he had the look and build of a bull, a nearly immovable offensive center on an American football team. His brown hair was now age and stress flecked with gray. He kept it in a short, pompadour style. He had successfully built famous skyscrapers, in New York City and in the London Docklands, before he began his international, five star resort destination career.

The Liwa Qsar Project was his sixth resort destination, all massive, all complex, all uniquely themed, all honored by Conde Nast, for both quality and success. He knew how to put a job together and how to finish it; and he, too, knew people. He used, intimidation and anger as tools to motivate people who didn't motivate themselves.

In his mid fifties, Bob had a puffy face, not gross but, definitely tainted red from chronic, high blood pressure. That complexion coupled with his weight, and three packs of cigarettes a day, all suggested his early retirement, and soon.

Chalmers introduced himself, "Excuse me, Mr. Rosenwinkel, my name is Chalmers, I am here from CTF, to talk about external site finishes."

Bob Rosenwinkel, with a welcoming, an infectiously warm smile reached out, shook Chalmers' hand and said, "Call me Bob. I heard you were coming. Nice to meet a fellow American. C'mon in Chalmers, sit down."

Chalmers sat down in front of Bob's desk and said, "You seemed a bit distracted when I looked in..."

Bob answered in his down-home, midwest American finest, "Yeah, I'm a fuckin' short-timer--I have been here in the desert, for about eighteen months now-- seven days a week, with no time off. My dick is pointing to the DXB exit gate. I'll be in Bangkok, this Sunday, for a good hose down; and, who knows after that."

Bob's smooth, blade-shaven face had a thin, strong, Jackie Gleason kind of pencil mustache. Then with a Jackie Gleason, over the top drama, in his voice, he began, "Now, what can I do for you?"

Chalmers opened, "I have been told that the landscape consultant and the landscape sub contractor are getting nowhere, what's going on?"

Chalmers had walked into Bob's game, "It's real simple, your landscape consultant is a cunt, and your landscape contractor team are nothing but a bunch of fuckin' assholes."

Taking the ride, Chalmers asked, "What do you mean, Bob?"

Bob, took a deep, long, drag, on his cigarette. He held the smoke in his lungs. Then, as he slowly rolled the cigarette between his fingers, he examined it. He slowly let the smoke out, in the air above him, watched it dissipate, then looked back at the cigarette in his hand. He opened his eyes very wide, focussed on Chalmers, and laid it out, "Look, when it comes to this work, there are only three kinds of people: Dicks, who get the work done. Cunts, who get it done to them. And assholes, who just get in the way."

Steel-gray eyes sparkling, Bob looked directly into Chalmers' eyes, and got to the meat, "Now, I am going to have these buildings built, serviced, their 200 keys delivered; and, they will be sitting in nothing but a pile of fuckin' sand. You CTF guys forced this consultant and contractor on us, now, you guys better fix it! You've got six months, Chalmers! Am I clear? Do you follow me?"

Not for the first time, Chalmers felt the heat. He stood up, looked his countryman in the eyes, shook his hand, and finished, with just one more question, "Yeah, I hear you, where is the landscape sub-contractor's site office?"

7.5: Marwan Abourachid

Things were shaping up now. In a project process sense, Chalmers saw nothing unusual in what he found from either Isley or Rosenwinkel. He knew he would have a free hand, as long as he could assure improved adherence to schedule, accomplished work within the development budget and, steady progress toward a stunning opening day experience.

Two construction trailers over on the ground floor Chalmers entered and found a narrow central corridor with doors to nine rooms and a toilet. Looking for the landscape sub, Chalmers walked down the corridor. The locating signs were A4

size paper printouts taped on all doors. He found two doors with landscaper signs. He stuck his head into one of the two landscaper rooms and asked for the Project Manager. They said, "Next door."

Each landscaper room was about four meters by four meters, normal for site sub-contractor offices. Each room was stuffed with four desks, chairs, a refrigerator, computers, routers, bookcase with shelves of files, reports messily scattered on all desktops, a plotter in one corner, a printer tucked into a another corner, plans and papers everywhere on the floor. Each office had about five people squeezed into a space, sized for two--low budget all the way--poor working conditions for sure.

Chalmers introduced himself and politely asked to meet the Project Manager. If this was a typical hard and soft landscape¹⁸ construction office it would have Lebanese in charge, with a handful of Syrians and Egyptians in support. That was the case. Mr. Marwan, stood up, introduced himself, and asked one of his people to give up his chair for Chalmers.

Marwan Abourachid was a grizzled Lebanese, in his mid fifties, five foot eight, 195 heavy pounds, and more than a bit paunchy in the stomach from all those years of great Lebanese food. His graying, ruffled hair, and stubble beard, looked like he had just rolled out of bed, after a two day binge. He was friendly and gentlemanly to meet; but, he carried the underlying bitterness of a Lebanese who had had his country taken away from him by Western powers, by other outside powers, by regional politics. He had lost his homeland. He was of the diaspora. He was a Lebanese with no way home, except in his dreams.

So, with his Agricultural Engineering degree, from the American University in Beirut, he had made his expatriate living, building gardens and landscapes for rich clients--Saudis and Emiratis. Among friends, Marwan had long ago concluded that these clients were for the most part all just crude and tasteless Bedouins, without the culture and the class of the worldly cosmopolitan Lebanese--the Lebanese, who for millennia, starting with the Phoenicians, had been the keepers of culture, in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin.

Marwan was happy to make as much money as possible by skimping and skimming on every aspect of the job to plump up his own retirement. His own retirement? He hoped it would be a peaceful place in the foothills of the cedar forest mountains of Lebanon just a short drive outside of Beirut.

¹⁸ Hard landscaping is paving and walls, everything that does not grow. Soft landscaping is the growing bit and the irrigation that keeps it alive.

Marwan offered cooled bottled water. They sat down to talk while the office continued around them.

For one of the most prestigious contracting firms in Riyadh and throughout all of Saudi Arabia, Marwan had worked for twenty five years building landscapes and gardens. Here at Liwa, he was responsible for all the hardscape and softscape. He was quite proud that the hardscape was pretty close to being on schedule. He was also proud that all the requisite India-quarried sandstone was either on-site or in-route. But on the subject of softscape he was defensive, evasive.

He and Chalmers talked about the climate here in the Empty Quarter versus Riyadh, and the Red Sea. They talked about site water availability and quality. It was the local season to be planting date palms. Marwan had 1,000 date palms to plant, and none of them had been planted yet. Marwan complained that the General Contractor had not made any areas available to him.

Chalmers told him that was no surprise, every job site was that way.

Pushing hard, Chalmers said to Marwan, "Possession of site areas among subcontractors is like a rugby scrum, if you do not grab the ball, the other side will not hand it to you. It is your job to win or lose! Grab it Marwan! You've got to make this happen!"

Marwan looked distracted. Chalmers continued, "So, have you sourced the palms? Have they been approved for quality?"

Marwan, in an encouraging and confident way, replied, "Not to worry, there are plenty. I've planted many thousands in Saudi Arabia, and I will do a first class job here."

Despite hearing a gentlemanly tone, Chalmers heard the evasion and sensed a growing dissonance in Marwan's air.

They did some quick math and found that Marwan would need to be planting 200 date palms per week right now to finish the planting before the hottest of the summer arrived.

Marwan said, "I will bring as many palms and people as required." Chalmers had been through this before. The words meant nothing. He would have to push and cajole this one home. The bottom line was that Marwan might get everything in the ground--the night before opening day, and it would be straggly,

messy, under stress. It would never pass for a five star A-lister party opening with all leading Emiratis in attendance.

Chalmers asked, “What about the 200,000 trees, shrubs and ground covers for the project? Have the shop drawings been submitted and approved? Have the plants been procured? Have they been approved? Are they in a hardening-off program already, so they will be ready for planting at the end of the hottest season?”

Marwan, confident and gentlemanly as before, replied with no specificity, “Not to worry, the plants are at the nursery.”

Chalmers, continuing to apply the pressure, said, “At the nursery? Ok, how about we meet at the nursery tomorrow, with your horticultural specialist, and look at samples, check quantities, for all the required plants?”

Feeling the pressure, Marwan, with his gentlemanly overtone of insolence, said, “Ok, we can meet there tomorrow at 10AM. The nursery is just outside Abu Dhabi. I’ll tell our Nursery Manager.”

They agreed. Chalmers, taking the Nursery Manager’s contact details, to confirm the route to the nursery, then shook hands with Marwan, thanking him for his hospitality and said, good bye.

Chalmers’ meetings were finished for the day.

He had found no shelter out here. Amongst the people, their personalities and the desert itself, Chalmers now had both feet stuck. He was knee deep into the mashup.

EPISODE 8: THE NURSERY

Maya, M.I.A., knows how business works in this region, when she writes:
Pirate skulls and bones...
...bonafide hustler...making my name...
...all I wanna do is
...take your money.
--Maya Arulpragasam (M.I.A.)

8.1: Pirates

Twenty five years ago in Southern California, nurseries like Monrovia, Keeline Wilcox and ValleyCrest had rows upon rows of trees, shrubs and ground covers, each properly pruned and grown to near perfection--seemingly unlimited quantities in any size you wanted. Selecting plants there was the same as going down the breakfast cereal aisle in a large American grocery store--huge selections, multiple sizes of each, in massive quantities. The plants in these nurseries were all uniformly healthy, labelled, well displayed and properly set out. That sophistication and mastery of horticultural and logistics processes integral to plant growth was a spectacular achievement that Chalmers, had never fully appreciated--until he worked with the pirate landscape contractors of the Middle East.

In the Western Region of Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s, a large new town was under construction and street trees were part of the infrastructure work. That was the first time Chalmers had seen on a competitively bid, huge project scale, plants being grown in the used empty tin cans, normally thrown out from labor camp kitchens. Always rusting, the cans were lucky to have drainage holes punched into them and they were always stacked cheek-by-jowl to save on land rental costs. Plants were hand watered seemingly by chance. Pruning equipment? Just never around.

The captain of these landscape operations was invariably a French, Belgian or Africaner character, meanness carved all over his face--a *Kepi blanc*¹⁹ escapee at best or, at least suitable for a starring role in a Werner Herzog movie. Everyone who worked for the captain was a day laborer at the cheapest rate. If the day laborers would have come from farm backgrounds in Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka--eh, never such luck.

¹⁹ The *Kepi blanc* is the hat worn by active members of the French Foreign Legion.

8.2: Entry Experience

In his thirty some years of Arabian Peninsula landscape work, Chalmers had interviewed and visited, how many landscape contractors, their offices, their staff, their nurseries, their projects? He couldn't count, there were so many. And how many would make his short list of preferred bidding contractors? He could not name three. But each country was different. Each project was different. Each team was different. He always started with hope. And so, today began with hope.

Chalmers had borrowed Jean-Claude's rental SUV and left particularly early in the morning, even for him. Large commercial nurseries were usually well off the beaten path. After a couple wrong turns and a mobile call to the Nursery Manager, Chalmers found the nursery. He had had to guess. At the turn off from the main road--no signs. Then Chalmers drove the better part of two maybe three kilometers down an unmarked, unpaved soft sand and gatch access road. He thought he must be on the right track when for the last kilometer he watched along the road side a continuous two meter high wire fence, covered with shade cloth and further protected by a single hedge row of large, full *Conocarpus erectus*. Finally, there was a sign at the front gate. This was the place.

The front gate itself sat about ten meters from the sandy gatch road. He turned his SUV into the entry drive, also of sand and gatch. On either side of the entry drive, Chalmers saw a rather showy display of cloth bag containerized specimen²⁰ plants. It was a display, not a design--not quite mirrored on both sides of the gate.

As he turned in toward the gate, he passed by eight columnar plants, four on each side. They were three meter tall, *Bougainvillea species* and varieties, all tip-pruned into columnar submission, all in flower--dark red, rose, magenta, orange, yellow. Around them at their feet, on both sides of the entry, were loads of heavy, multi trunk *Chamaerops humilis*, six to eight natural trunks in each bag with an overall height of one and a half to two meters--quite nice specimens, maybe fifteen or more on each side.

Behind them all, in the background were, *Olea europea*, three on each side. All had beautifully furrowed, mature trunks, with an average diameter about fifty-sixty centimeters, lots of character, low branched--overall heights around four meters, broad spreads. But, these olives, these olives had had their mature secondary branching structure amputated, amputated before being shipped from wherever, Spain, Italy, Lebanon. The new juvenile growth didn't quite

²⁰ Specimen plants are special either by their large size or unique qualities. For nurseries, as in this case, specimen plants advertise the nursery's capabilities.

hide the ugly scars, but, that new growth did give promise of a hopefully renewed and healthy future.

Chalmers paused as he waited for someone to open the gate. He thought that this display of mature specimens represented a substantial financial commitment--there to impress the Sheiks, and Sheikas no doubt--and most likely to end up in their private gardens.

Meanwhile, a relaxed guard emerged from his cheap plastic arm chair seat in the shade, greeted Chalmers, wrote down his vehicle details, opened the gate and pointed him to the visitor car park, and the office entry.

The main office was of lesser quality than a site construction office specification. But to welcome visitors, in front of the office door, they had built an attractive modular set of seven tensile shade structures. Four of the shade structure modules covered four guest parking places. Three more modules functioned as a porte cochere entry to the office. He paused his vehicle under the porte cochere to look at the focal point of the office entry, a recirculating water fountain. He opened the SUV driver's side window and examined the fountain, pre-cast manufactured stone, three-tier, generic Mediterranean style. The fountain's central stem was three meters tall, and the lowest tier had a four meter diameter. As the water moved slowly, even parsimoniously, through its three tiers, it provided a refreshing sight, a subtle sound and even, an aura of sustainability. There was nothing flash about it. Detail in the casting was obviously weak.

Around the fountain on the paving and stacked on the broad edge of the lowest basin were a confusion of decorative pots--and pots and pots--a jumble of all sizes, shapes and colors, filled with every imaginable small and medium size *Aloe species* and *Agave species*. Sprinkled throughout the aloes and agaves were in varied sizes, most quite large, more than a dozen golden barrel cacti, *Echinocactus grusonii*. This jostling confusion of succulents and cacti more than made up for the cheap detail in the fountain. Overall, it was quite pleasant and actually fun for his eyes.

Chalmers parked his vehicle under one of the modular tensile shade structures, immediately adjacent to the fountain and the office entry. Checking the time, he still had nearly an hour until his scheduled meeting. He got out of his vehicle, and before entering the Nursery Office he paused under the translucent shade structures to look again at the succulent display, to enjoy the sight of plants in this hot and arid Empty Quarter sand desert, plants actually looking healthy.

8.3: Thomas George

Chalmers had worked his way through a disappointing maze of misdirection, and non direction, to finally arrive at the contractor's nursery. Then a couple nice plants and simple displays had sparked his hope. A nursery in the Empty Quarter meant there had to be water; and a nursery this size meant the land owner would likely be a member of the ruling family--just as he had been told, by Geoffrey Tate and Bob Rosenwinkel. Now, the important remaining questions were about nursery quality, nursery logistics and overall landscape project process management.

Chalmers lingered by the shaded fountain, enjoying this little distraction, trying to identify all the aloes and agaves when, the Nursery Manager came out and introduced himself, Thomas George, from India, Maharashtra to be exact. He offered to take Chalmers for a quick trip around the expansive nursery to give him some familiarity before their 10AM meeting. The game was on.

Thomas George, in his mid forties, was a second generation Christian from outside Bombay not far from Goa. His father was a farmer and Thomas, as a youngster, had won a local scholarship to a technical school where he studied agriculture. He completed those studies with honors and was invited to study at the College of Agriculture, Pune, where, while developing his horticultural focus, he received his Bachelor and Masters degrees. At five foot eight, 160 pounds, Thomas was clean shaven, with a full head of thick, black, coconut oiled hair. He was a family man with two daughters aged five and seven, and a son aged nine.

He had been a Nursery Manager for the contractor for just over a dozen years. While he had Christian humility, his pride in his work and his lack of exposure to the standard nursery practices of the modern West sometimes blinded him to the reality of the low quality of his standards. Some Lebanese categorized his work as, according to 'Indian Nursery Standards'--sticks in pots as Chalmers saw it. But the Lebanese, as his managers, were happy to be making money from it, earlier in Saudi Arabia, and now in the UAE.

Chalmers jumped into Thomas' golf cart. They sped right off through large, high clearance shade houses with mature palms and trees, ten meter shade houses, five meter shade houses, then three meter shade house after three meter shade house of shrubs and ground covers, all protected top and sides by 50% shade cloth. Chalmers then saw open field inventory rows of containerized trees, intensely stacked cheek-by-jowl with containerized shrubs underneath, they, too, jammed cheek-by-jowl.

Thomas took Chalmers through the propagation and potting up areas. To say Thomas was quick with numbers, was an understatement. He was an expert, in the art and science of mensuration.

He rattled off how many species, how many numbers, how many cubic meters of water per day, how many plants going to this job, to that job, how many coming in by container this week from Thailand, from Egypt, from Italy--how many plants overland from Oman. He was so quick and fluent, Chalmers was reminded of the *Slumdog Millionaire* film, particularly, the older brother of Jamal Malik, the fast-talking and street-wise, Saleem. How was Chalmers to know that Thomas, as a youngster, didn't ride the Maharashta Special train south out of Bombay, making a 'Saleem-like' teenage living off the Western tourist marks!? After all, Thomas has been successfully doing just that--employed for more than a dozen years operating huge nurseries, here and in Saudi Arabia--providing plants to the marks, the Western consultants.

As they arrived back at the office, Chalmers, all in all had been pleased to see standardized plastic pots, with drip, with spray irrigation. But he was blown away that he was still seeing the cheek-by-jowl storage of every plant there. It was a large, intensively cultivated and highly active nursery, filled with palms, trees, shrubs, and ground covers, but, more than half under dust-laden shade cloth.

By the end of the quick trip around, Chalmers had seen too many, very poor conditions undermining successful production of strong, healthy plants.

8.4: Digging In

Marwan arrived. While greetings were cordial, there was no love lost between Marwan and Thomas. Marwan demonstrated no confidence in anything Thomas said, offering only a modicum of professional collegiality. This was not unusual, as Chalmers had seen, certain Arabs throughout the Middle East, regularly treat any Indians, any sub-continentals, especially those of Hindu beliefs as less than servants.

Chalmers thought this friction between Indians and Arabs was about more than religion. He knew the Brits for practicality in the nineteenth century installed the Rupee as currency in this region, during the same time that a lot of the rest of the peninsula, including Lebanon, was under Ottoman control.

As a result of the Rupee currency in the Gulf region, many Indians had long been in middle and upper management positions, establishing their own business networks in support of their Arab owners. Last year, according to the

local newspapers, Indian expatriates sent home to India, US\$50 billion for deposit. Another UAE local business survey noted that of expatriates in the UAE earning more than US\$250,000 a year, a full 20% were Indians.

They knew how to run a business, make money, and network--an Indian mafia, if you will--born out of their English education obsession with careful bookkeeping, and their own home country based real life 'slumdog-eat-slumdog' competition. This Lebanese-Indian friction was hopefully just a sideshow. If it was more, Chalmers would have to correct it.

Chalmers asked Marwan and Thomas to show the plants for Liwa Qsar. The project plants had not been consolidated, yet in one part of the nursery. Chalmers asked why. Thomas said he was awaiting instructions from Marwan. Marwan, looking out the window, said nothing. Neither Marwan nor Thomas had a contract project plant list. So, Chalmers, taking his plant list from the set the LandID Consultant had given him earlier, laid it on the table for their review and discussion.

Marwan looked at it, quickly flipped through it, and said, "This is not the list we bid, the plants are different, and the total numbers are all wrong."

Chalmers saw this for what it was, a belligerent contractor's stock response, at best. He proceeded then to take them through the list, plant by plant. It turned out, upon careful review, only about 10% of the plants were different, and the numbers were not too dissimilar. Marwan's obstructionism was obvious.

8.5: Golf Cart Caravan

Thomas George's office, cum meeting room, was spare and crowded--organized, but barely adequate. His desk sat at the end of the meeting table. The meeting table could accommodate five guests. Additionally, and tightly squeezed in along the edges of the room, were at least three more nursery office support people, including his finance manager, all in one open unpartitioned room. They all continued their work in the background as Chalmers managed the meeting. The people in the room, in fact all the people working in the nursery were sub-continentals--Marwan and Chalmers the only people not of dark skin.

The preliminary office and project formalities complete, Marwan, Thomas and Chalmers prepared to look at the project plants in the nursery. Thomas called his two right hand men from the nursery, Vishnu and Padma. They brought two golf carts, and then, after all climbed in, drove everyone around the nursery as they worked through the plant list. It was a disaster. The nursery had the

plants, and the quantities, but over 90% of the shrubs and ground covers were in shade houses that effectively, because of heavy dust on the external shade cloth surface provided 70% shade. And none was well formed, well branched or naturally structured.

Of the broad leaved trees, maybe about 25%, at most, had, by chance, any properly developed secondary branch structure. The balance suffered from being grown too close together, for too long, with too little light. And, there was no dedicated hardening off area.

Chalmers was heartened to see that most of the plants were healthy, as far as their leaf condition was concerned, so watering, soil pH, fertilizer, pest and disease control were acceptable. But this was not enough. Chalmers had to make a point while they were in a shrub and ground cover shade house.

He asked them to stop the carts. Chalmers got out, asked for their attention, and said, "Look down this shade house, block after block of healthy looking masses of plants; but, excuse me, if I call this as I see it. It is a big 'shell game'-- a cheat--with the bad plants hidden!"

"As we look from this central aisle, they all look good. Each three meter by ten meter mass of potted plants looks excellent. Let me show you how false that is, in this case with the hibiscus. Let me chose any three or four plants at random, from the edge, or the center, of these cheek-by-jowl stacked pots."

"Look. Set them out here in the aisle, by themselves, where we can easily see and examine them. Take a good look at these plants, individually. What do we have? Stems like weak, soda straws, tall and thin, single stems, sixty centimeters tall, with only two or three healthy leaves on top--soda straws, so weak, they can hardly stand upright by themselves--soda straws, straining for light--soda straws, having none of the natural branching structure of the species!"

"Not one of these plants is acceptable now. They are all losers. And none should be sent to site like this!" The demonstration was clear. For a moment, nobody offered opposing arguments.

Then Marwan pointed out, "The consultant's specifications ask for 65 centimeter height; those hibiscus meet the specification."

Chalmers responded, "Just a minute, Mr. Marwan, the specifications are for a plant of natural form. These hibiscus are abnormal, poorly formed due to the conditions of growth here in the nursery."

Marwan continued, “When we plant these on site, we will cut them back, and they will branch out with natural growth that will be adapted to the site. Isn’t that what you want?”

“No! The plants must be adapted, hardened off, before they are delivered to the site. The softscape work is already behind. Plus, it is like suicide to take a plant from this 70% shade and plant it out, in the middle of the inland desert without protection. That will not happen. This project will be the best one you have ever built, so in order for that to happen, I need your cooperation. We must improve, here, in this nursery!”

Chalmers concluded, “In front of us, is the shell game. The plants as a mass of green leaves all looked acceptable; but, not one individual plant was acceptable. You guys have serious work to do.”

They got back into the golf carts and moved off.

Leaving one shade cloth area, back outdoors again, and rounding the corner, Chalmers spotted, directly in full sun, a couple rows of a surprisingly well structured young tree, about three meters tall--with an appropriate caliper, a healthy set of well distributed secondary branches, all with healthy foliage throughout--unusual for this nursery. They caught his attention.

Chalmers directed, “Stop here! What are these Mr. Thomas?”

Everyone piled out of the golf carts. Thomas for once was struggling for the name. Chalmers thought they looked familiar, but he was not sure. Vishnu and Padma pulled one sample tree out of the line, and placed it in the middle of the open path so all could look at it. Chalmers saw no butchery, but rather a good 360 degree distribution of healthy, naturally grown, undisturbed secondary branches--a beautiful, a graceful natural form, and no stretching for sunlight.

Marwan recalled, “These come from Pakistan, if I am not mistaken.”

Pakistan? Vishnu and Padma agreed. Thomas said, “Right, we received them about two months ago.” But no one could remember the name.

Then Marwan said, “I know them. The Pakistanis make tea and poultices from them to help their young girls grow larger breasts.” He used both hands to demonstrate larger breasts.

Thomas translated this into Hindi. Vishnu and Padma looked closely at the leaves on the trees, made similar motions with their hands, demonstrating larger

breasts, and agreed the same thing happens in their countries, India, and Bangladesh.

Now, it was 'men's club time', and all were smiling, some sheepishly, some lustfully, at the thought of women's larger breasts. Chalmers smiled, even chuckled to himself as he remembered Eddie Murphy in the movie, *Beverly Hills Cop*, when, as Axel Foley, he took Detective Billy Rosewood, for his first visit to an LAX strip club, and said, 'Don't worry Billy, everybody likes big titties!'

As cooler heads returned, more discussion ensued and the tree in question turned out to be a tamarind, *Tamarindus indica*. Chalmers made a mental note of these good looking, well structured, healthy young trees, and then they all got back to project business.

They discussed how the shade cloth was reducing open sun outdoor temperatures of 45-50°C down to near 40°C. Chalmers verified the temperatures with his Kestrel²¹. He then reminded all that Liwa Qsar had no shade cloth. Daytime temperatures would regularly be 50-55°C in June, July, August and September. And most importantly, there would be no shade from buildings during the months of peak summer heat, because the project was just south of the Tropic of Cancer.

8.6: Making it Work

Every plant in the nursery was exotic. Every plant was from a foreign land, just like all the workers. There was not, in this nursery, one plant, native or indigenous to this Empty Quarter landscape. That was the nature of landscape practice, the landscape industry in the Arabian Peninsula. The entire native plant endeavor was too young for the seed and cutting selection and propagation effort to have evolved and matured into a commercial tool. Chalmers understood the need for environmental protection as afforded by over head and side nettings of shade cloth. Among plants, only the strong, only the adaptable, could survive the relentless, aggressive, blended imposition of--blistering sun--scathing wind--low humidity.

Their site tour of project plants complete, all returned to the office, refreshed themselves courtesy of Thomas' staff with quarter liter boxes of cool, bottled juice, and cool, bottled water. Then they began to work through the plant list, one more time. The three of them reviewed the plant list, for which plants were most likely to fail--that is, not to establish themselves either from the unremitting

²¹ Chalmers always carried a Kestral weather meter with him; this time he had a model 3500.

heat, the low humidity, the strong sunlight of the Tropic of Cancer, or the aggressive wind of the Empty Quarter. A full 40% of the plants were unanimously agreed not survivable under those site conditions. Such was the climatic difference between the Empty Quarter of the populated, humid coastal desert, and the Empty Quarter of the naked, dry inland desert, the Liwa Qsar project climate.

Under his breath, Chalmers swore at the consultants, and at the bevy of CTF design managers and project managers who had let this 'guarantee for failure' be approved.

Then they began to list proven and practical replacements that were available in the region without overseas importation. They worked through the list, identifying locally available substitutions for the 40%, too weak to live plants. Chalmers emphasized the consultant's height, spread and structure specifications.

He told Thomas and Marwan that due to the obviously unacceptable quality of their current project plant inventory, he would have to delay payment to them for their monthly nursery progress invoice. However, he added, if they submitted acceptable samples for his approval next week, he would not delay that payment. Chalmers emphasized that without exception, anything short of 100% sample submittal and approval would be met with financial penalties. Both Marwan and Thomas said they understood and agreed.

Chalmers tasked Marwan to mark up the shop drawings with the agreed 'no-cost' plant substitutions. Chalmers then tasked Thomas to set up a project specific hardening off area at the nursery--to get the plants accustomed to sun and wind exposure.

Chalmers addressed Marwan and Thomas directly and forcefully, "Let me make clear what I expect from you on this project. The client is paying you to deliver healthy plants to the project site...healthy plants with natural form and structure that meet the specifications. This nursery is where that improvement must occur."

He continued, "The project site shall not be a plant hospital. No weak or injured plants shall be delivered to, or planted on, the project site. Is that clear? These are the basic client quality expectations on all plants. Do you both understand this?"

Marwan and Thomas, both agreed, confirmed they understood the instruction. Chalmers then explained the plant spacing and pruning that would be necessary

in the nursery before any of the stock could be shipped to site. No one had pruning tools. And no one from the contractor's side could seriously discuss techniques to bring these plants to a healthy, natural form.

For now, Thomas had to prepare a dedicated area in the nursery to permit the consolidation of the project plants for hardening off. This week's tasks were agreed and next week's meeting time was set. Upgrading and training would be on the next week's agenda.

Chalmers was reeling. He left the nursery feeling like he had just been beating his head against the wall. Counting Thomas, his staff, and Marwan, altogether, this contractor had more than fifty years of landscape and nursery experience in the Middle East.

Yet, Marwan's project management logistics were verging on negligent. And in Thomas' nursery, many of their standard practices regarding plant structure were woeful at best, if existent at all. This part of the project was a disaster in progress. While not entirely hopeless, it needed immediate and massive attention.

Chalmers needed someone, someone with mature, first class horticultural skills, plus nous and nerve, to oversee the logistics, pruning and hardening off in this nursery to get the plants and their installation to five star quality standard. He thought, "Maybe, maybe Theuns has a South African connection, I'll ask him this Thursday--because this contractor has no one."

EPISODE 9: FINDING MAJLIS

Majlis is an Arabic term meaning "a place of sitting", used to describe various types of special gatherings and places of special gatherings, among common interest groups, be it religious, administrative, or social.
--Wikipedia

9.1: The Plan

Early in his expatriate career, Chalmers had a mentor--a mentor who had for decades already been working in Iran, Turkey and the Arab Middle East. He told Chalmers that their white collar management, their consultancy positions in the pecking order here were exactly the same as the sweaty laborers on site. White collar, blue collar--no difference--hired, manipulable and replaceable. They were all 'no counters'.

Experience in this part of the world had taught Chalmers that strict plans and aggressive adherence to them would guarantee the cross cultural undoing of any Western professional. But, he also knew that without a plan, these large projects could never succeed in the time frame required. He always kept an overall plan foremost in his mind. That gave him big picture guidelines such that he could always revise the details in real time, according to the unpredictable vagaries of time, circumstance, people. This was performance art in action.

It was Thursday. Theuns wanted his update and briefing at 9PM at The Library, a place where he sometimes met a couple key Emiratis who had interest in his Empty Quarter Project, Liwa Qsar. To prepare himself for that briefing, Chalmers planned to arrive earlier than usual to sit with Jean-Claude. Chalmers wanted to review his own findings, checking them against Jean-Claude's in depth knowledge of political and social contexts in the region.

The Library, where Chalmers was to meet Jean-Claude, and later, Theuns, was a refuge, carefully hidden, deep, within a mysterious sequence of intimate, private gardens.

9.2: Library Gardens

Finding The Library, in the hotel's sprawling landscaped grounds, was a real life, garden mystery--an exquisite challenge, like walking through the Alhambra for the first time. If you liked walking through garden rooms, then you would find here not just any garden rooms, but an entrancing sequence of garden rooms, without any repeating units. You would find windows, and doors tempting you

with alluring glimpses, sensual opportunities, timeless experiences. For the first time guest, finding the way through, required a letting go of the disciplined left side of the brain--accepting an invisible flowing thread of energy, that was inherent in the gardens themselves--becoming a captive, or--becoming captivated by the gardens. Really, it was all, a bit, magical.

Chalmers arrived by cab, at the parking lot porte cochere tent. The tent had a style. And so did the One and Only attendants--gardenesque--relaxed. The attendants were dressed in Moroccan style farmers trousers, full cut, baggy legs gathered at the calves with a very low crotch, sewn just above the knees. They took Chalmers' overnight bag from the cab, then offered him, if he would like, a seat in the tent, scented towels to refresh, and cooled, herbed water to drink. Chalmers declined a sit down, requested the attendants to deliver his bag to The Library, and then asked the best way on foot to The Library.

From the tent porte cochere, they showed him the main path, and two secondary paths, then told him the choice was his because all paths ultimately led to The Library. Chalmers chose one of the secondary paths. It was just after 7PM, and his meeting with Jean Claude wasn't until 8. He was looking forward to this garden walk, to this brief dalliance.

He started eagerly. The aged looking concrete path was about two meters wide, not colored, probably heavily salted and irregularly sand blasted, originally. But, at intervals along the path, about every three meters, it was crossed with narrow bands of dark blue, small mosaic tiles. It was a simple accent band, nothing fancy, and imparted thus to the path a soft, relaxing rhythm.

The sun had just set. As he walked, Chalmers saw sunset sky reflections in the mosaic tile bands. They reflected a subtle pattern to his eyes. Some of the two centimeter by two centimeter mosaic tiles were satin finish, and others were, matte finish. The result was a subtle, small scale repeating geometric pattern.

Before long Chalmers found himself in an oasis like grove of date palms, *Phoenix dactylifera*. The date palms were tall, mature, old. None had been trimmed. Underneath each tall palm were shrubby clumps of multiple off-shoots, multiple suckers. They were pushing out in every direction, rough, but full and healthy. Like an old, timeless, date palm oasis that had never, ever, been managed for its fruit, the place had that kind of disheveled but belonging character. It was wild--date palms of all sizes--sand--sky--crepuscular colors--chiaroscuro values--and wind, just stirring enough to agitate a coarse rattling from the tops of the tallest palms, from their old, lifeless skirts of drooping fronds. It was a strange rustling, clattering sound, coming and going.

His path now offered a fork. There was an engraved sign post at the fork, with a bronze plaque, which had this quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

“For he on honey dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of paradise.”

The verse gave him no idea which way to go. Through the tangle of date palms, he peered ahead for opportunity along each fork. He saw portions of tall stucco walls ahead in both directions. He listened. From the right, he heard a soft and steady burbling sound, flowing water, and its innate promise of relief. From the left he heard nothing.

Pulled by the sound of the water, he walked the right fork. He liked that sound of water. He trusted his ears. Through the wild date palm clumps his eyes could see only parts of what appeared to be a continuous wall, maybe three meters tall, a rough stucco, taupe in color. The path curved and took him toward a tall, domed portal--certainly his way through the wall--certainly his continuation of--his ride--on the sound, of flowing water.

9.3: Fountain Courtyard

The way through the wall wasn't a door. It was more than a door--more than an opening. For a Westerner like Chalmers, it was a Lewis Carroll experience. It was an archway through a portal--a portal including a beautifully proportioned, glossy, turquoise blue dome. The portal, from the ground to the top of the dome, was maybe four meters tall. Its archway edges had a pair of cutout corner niches at both sides of the portal entry. Built into the niches, behind ornate screens, were flame filled bowls.

In the fading crepuscule, Chalmers could not miss these delicate fire bowl luminaires--the fire licking upwards--by itself a visual magnet. Nor could he miss, in front of the flames, the ornate screen, richly patterned with Persian flowers and vines twining upward. Chalmers' eyes flitted between the foreground Persian screen pattern, and the background luminaire flames--both licking--both teasing his eyes. He had to pause to take it all in. He had lost--he had forgotten--he no longer heard the sound of water.

The fire bowl luminaires were at his eye level. At sixty centimeters wide and thirty centimeters tall, these low profile bowls contained flames fueled by gas. Behind them, in their niches, was a circular geometric progression pattern dominated by cream color, small size mosaic tiles that spread out and linked up to the edges and frames, and finally merged seamlessly with the niche frame mosaic of creams, turquoises, dark blues.

Walking under the archway into the portal, Chalmers noted that the overhead, soft light inside, was indirectly reflected off the dome's interior surface. He saw the dome was lined with small mosaic tiles, dominated by creams, accented by dark blues and turquoises--but in an eight point circular geometric pattern. He paused again.

Surrounded as he was inside the portal by the four matched fire bowl luminaires, Chalmers delighted in the subtlety of light, the elegance of pattern, and the dimensional comfortability of the space. He thought, "This is spectacular...beautiful...this is what landscape architecture is supposed to be. Captivating and inspirational garden rooms, doors...absolutely great experience!" Then, anticipation growing, he forced himself to move on.

Having just entered a new courtyard, he paused to observe a change in paving. At his feet, he saw, not rough textured concrete, but a paving that looked more like a carpet now. In the center of the path, a cream mosaic geometric medallion sat on a background field of dark blue mosaic. Up ahead, the creme medallion mosaic evolved into a thin, linear, creme mosaic geometric pattern that carried Chalmers' eyes down the center of the path ahead to the middle of the courtyard--and the source of the sound he had earlier been seeking--a water feature--its sound--refreshing--refreshing as when he first heard it.

He walked forward slowly, and looked at a low, dome structured fountain, the construction maybe a meter, or so, high in the center, and perhaps with four meters diameter in plan. As he continued to catalog the details, the right side of his brain overwhelmed him. He could no longer measure the fountain...he could only...water heaving from the dome's oculus...bright swelling nub of water on top...a voluptuous movement...more than refreshment...a much deeper fulfillment...a promise of new life...bubbling flow of water down the sides...gently shimmering over the shapely dome.

Chalmers was beckoned, then absorbed by its sound and imagery. Enchanted, he continued walking toward it, and, paused at the edge. The water flowed freely. Sensual inputs flooding his eyes and ears. Simple pleasures. He took full advantage of them. With his eyes, he wrapped his hands around the attractive dome, and in this subliminal possession, he took pleasure. Then he leaned over and plunged both of his hands onto the dome surface into the flow of water...his hands flat against the dome, supporting his entire weight...he yielded to the flow...the water was strong...the water pushed over his wrists and up his forearms...Chalmers took the energy from it, fully, freely.

He pulled his hands out, and let them hang limply, at his sides. He had taken the energy from the pleasure dome, and now, his arms and hands, felt relaxed,

spent. They were cooling in the strangely warm evening air, while his eyes still enjoyed the rapturous water movement.

Chalmers looked at the fountain edge, its raised edge, circular like the dome. It was a coping wide enough and high enough to function also as a seat wall. He sat down on it, and recovered a bit. He liked the visual texture and tactile feel of the coping material--flamed granite--eased at the edges--color was a brownish gray with sparkling, metallic orange flecking.

The fountain's dome was tiled, a patterned mosaic, beginning at the oculus, the circular source on the top, and then as it descended down the dome sides, elaborated to twelve points, where the water disappeared at the coping edge. The pattern symmetries played joyfully...light and water rubbing over them, over each other...caressing each other...sparkling, glistening, always changing wavelets, each unpredictably enhancing the graceful, yet unchanging mosaic geometries underneath.

He pulled his eyes away, and looked around the courtyard. He found it to be intimate, delicate, balanced, symmetrical. Four walls. Four domed portals with archways, one in the middle of each wall, and eight fire bowl luminaire niches, two at each archway. There were hidden wall sconces, uplighting a seventy centimeter wide engraved arabesque band. That band connected, at eye level, all eight fire bowl luminaires. He imagined himself inside a gift wrapped jewel box--an elegant, an ethereal experience.

Those same sconces provided a uniform backlight for the palm tree trunk silhouettes, silhouettes he had just noticed. In this courtyard were irregularly spaced, mature palms, in numbers. Those palms--the only plants in the courtyard--were slender, delicate, clean, single trunk palms, with overlapping umbrella like canopies--in sufficient numbers to elicit a 'feeling' in the courtyard--to impart a distinct character. Chalmers looked carefully, and in the dim twilight, he noted the horizontal bandings on the smooth gray trunks--a bit like royal palms, but much smaller--the same size as foxtails--but not foxtails. His eyes followed up the trunk and saw the small loose clusters of red berries, the red fruits--they were *Veitchii merrillii*, Manila palms. They had about four, five, maybe some had six meters of clear trunk. The palms sat in a fine crushed gravel, like a grit. Aside from the mosaic paving, that grit was the courtyard ground plane surface.

Beneath the palm canopy, scattered randomly in this courtyard, were five or six teak chairs, some upright, some loungers. They looked comfortable. Chalmers stood up, walked over and took one of the teak chairs. He arranged it to where he could easily see the intricate details of both the fountain in the center and,

also, at the same time, the subtly uplighted, engraved arabesque accent band on the courtyard wall. The highly refined, well crafted engraved band contrasted nicely, being slightly raised above the rough stucco surface of the three meter high courtyard wall. The uplight enhanced its textural depths.

The band of *girih* arabesque carving--a continuously self replicating repetition of patterned lines--three dimensional interlacing--geometrically intertwined and overlapping--reminded Chalmers of M. C. Escher's visual puzzles.

Looking up through the overstory of well established palms, Chalmers liked the relaxed, mature feeling of character in this courtyard. He felt comfortable. Chalmers relaxed in the chair. From a nearby mosque, the sunset Magreb call to prayer had commenced. He listened to the prayer call. The melody drew his attention...and the water flow became the background...

Back and forth, between the central fountain patterns, and the perimeter strapwork band patterns around the courtyard walls, Chalmers let his eyes... wander...focus on one, then the other. As his eyes traced the pattern path of the tiles, moving from one pattern to another, in and out...out and in...again, and again...his intelligence wandered...his mind wandered...

Without notice, time passed.

He shook himself. He realized that all along in this courtyard, he had been hypnotized by the art and craft of architectural details...intricate surface decorations and subtle, indirect lighting had teased and tempted...had beckoned his eyes to follow, complex, geometric patterns...that in turn, led him to discover, the smallest repeating unit while uncovering multiple new units along the way. It was a strange, but wonderful experience wherein, the patterns themselves had taken his eyes, then his mind on a journey, a journey that included multiple times getting lost, then re-discovering the way again...until he had found himself in some sort of meditative state...

He had just experienced a sophisticated...blending of art and architecture... wherein time had been blurred. A mesmerizing chiaroscuro of light in this garden had carried him into a different type of chiaroscuro, where reality slips into dream...or was it trance...trance, maybe not too different from the music and dance of Islamic Sufism...losing track of time...

Chalmers paused and thought, "The historically rich edges of Islam were, always, more culturally intriguing, more rewarding than, the fundamentalist core--certainly as far as art, music and architecture were concerned." And there was one thing he did know--these were the walks, in the evenings, in the

gardens, provided by the wealth of these oil countries, that told Chalmers he was back in his milieu.

Then, as he sat alone, there came to him...on the breeze...a lighter than light fragrance...then a stronger, though similar fragrance brushed across his face... the fragrance wafted teasingly into near recognition...a fragrance stronger than that borne by any woman...yet plucking the same strings...

There were no fragrant plants in this courtyard. Somewhere, not too far away, out in the larger landscape, beyond this little garden, Chalmers guessed, had to be one *Cestrum nocturnum*, hidden away, intermittently sharing with all, on the light evening breeze, its intoxicating perfume. He had followed his ears to find this fountain courtyard. Now, he would follow his nose.

9.4: Fragrance Courtyard

Chalmers rose, stretched, then began his search, walking in the direction of each of the three remaining portals. When following scents in the air, Chalmers' feet became impediments. He slogged, intent to find the source--to solve this garden mystery. At two of the portals, he lost the scent. At the last, the scent was stronger. He followed that path into a new courtyard, until it took him to a T-junction.

But he had lost the scent. Chalmers was surprised because the scent of what he figured was *Cestrum nocturnum* that had brought him to this courtyard, should have by now overwhelmed him.

He stood on the edge of a pungent plane, of low, hummocky shaped shrubs--a large panel of basil plants, *Ocimum sanctum*. This rectangular bed of *Ocimum* was the central feature. Forming the far edges to the long sides of this rectangular garden courtyard were double rows of oleander, *Nerium oleander*, full grown and double pink, directly against the face of the tall courtyard walls. By themselves, the Mediterranean maquis sweetness of oleander, and the earthy Indian sub tropical basil gave this entire courtyard a solid, earthy fragrance.

But there was something about the mysterious missing scent...something irreplaceable in that lost fragrance, which kept stirring Chalmers' emotions. To his surprise, he felt as if he was being emotionally compelled, by something that when lost, remains inexplicably...and hauntingly, irretrievable...a lost love...a deep affection gone missing...out of his grasp. An emotional illusion had taken control.

Awkwardly puzzled, he, in an attempt to stabilize his orientation, looked around. His entry path into this courtyard had not allowed him to get to its exact center. The courtyard was surrounded by walls, all three meters high. But the shape of this courtyard was, like the central basil bed, rectangular--rectangular in thankfully comfortable proportions--maybe golden mean proportions, pleasant, soothing to behold. That helped him.

His entry portal, with its pair of flame bowl luminaires, appeared to have been the only entry. The two long sides had no other openings; and this courtyard was definitely larger than the last. He looked to the left, on one of the narrow ends was a significant colonnade of four slender columns with connecting arches, proportioned very much like, the Alhambra Court of the Myrtles--though this courtyard, unlike the Court of the Myrtles, had no obvious water features, save the surrogate *Ocimum* bed.

To his right though, an exceptionally sparkling brilliance caught his eye--against the back wall of the courtyard, under an apparent bosque of trees. He could be sure of nothing other than a sparkling brilliance. The crepuscule and its chiaroscuro played with, deluded his depth perception. He walked toward the brilliance. Absent the sweet night fragrance, for which he yearned, he let his eyes do the searching.

As he walked, the details emerged. There was a small bosque. Within that bosque, he saw a brightly lighted niche, within which appeared to be dancing, polychromatic, *muqarna*²² details.

As he walked closer, he saw more of that lustrous polychromed niche in the wall. It protected a water spigot. The cast bronze spigot quietly sputtered drops...he was forced to stop, forced to look, to listen...the only sounds...the irregular, solitary drips, falling into a semi circular basin of water plants, sitting at ground level. The bright *muqarna* was cheerful, but the hesitant drops of falling water were sad, lonely, uncertain.

Chalmers shifted into analysis mode. A granite coping formed the basin edge and was a convenient seat wall--the same color, texture and dimension as he had just enjoyed in the Fountain Courtyard. He saw within the water basin, *Equisetum hyemale* and *Cyperus alternifolia*, growing in partially submerged pots.

²² Muqarna is an Arabic word that has some Persian roots. It describes a three dimensional architectural ceiling corner detail that is a radial geometric assemblage of stalactites. Examples can be found in the Alhambra, North Africa, northeastern Iran and Sicily.

He looked at the back wall of the water basin, the *muqarna* niche, two and a half meters high by, one and three quarter meters wide, enclosed on its edges by a plaster band frame, decorated with incised arabesque. The *muqarna* was a real three dimensional eye catcher. Its sparkling colors...creme...light mint green...dark jade green...and a golden filigree accenting all edges...it was a kid's ice cream treat, for grown-up eyes. Everything glowed from the uplights hidden in the water basin.

The basin's water surface, stirred into waves by the sputtering spigot above, refracted as lighted shadow lines...vibrating across, toying with, making alive in four dimensions, the *muqarna's* three dimensional brilliant surfaces. That play of lights and shadow lines, restfully massaged and calmed Chalmers' melancholy emotions...he was entranced by the light and color. Sight had overwhelmed sound, well designed details had taken him to another world of thought...of feelings.

He made a note to himself--if the Empty Quarter Liwa Qsar project did not have garden room experiences at least as captivating as these worlds within worlds perceptions, weaving back and forth between reality and dreams--if LandID had not done this well, he'd make sure to fix it, to make sure, Liwa Qsar became magical for opening day.

He looked around a bit. The paving had changed in this courtyard--no longer carpet like--no longer textured concrete. Now it was thirty by thirty centimeter terra cotta tiles in a diagonal field with soldier headers the same color and size along the edges--restrained, nicely under played. The bosque was genteel, with a handful of randomly distributed multi-trunk trees, *Millingtonia hortensis*, a good ten to twelve meters tall. Chalmers wondered if perhaps these India cork trees had been the source of the fragrance. He checked. They were well and truly past their flowering season. Nevertheless, he did enjoy that they were surprisingly strong in appearance, well pruned, a joy to behold. They had excellent structure.

He saw two walkways leaving the India cork tree bosque, each moving down the long axis in this courtyard toward the portico end. As Chalmers headed toward the portico, he searched without success, for the missing fragrance. Then the portico captured his eyes. It was every bit of, if not a bit more than two stories tall. It sat up prominently on a substantial plinth, raised three or four steps above the courtyard. Its horizontal facade, was divided into, fifths--the two on each end were undecorated building mass--the interior three were decorative arches projecting out toward him, into the courtyard--the main central arch, the tallest.

Chalmers moved toward the portico stairs. Before stepping up to the portico, he discovered multiple clusters of pots in the forecourt, at the edges of the stairs--*Catharanthus roseus*, varieties, hybrids, growing healthfully in medium size, fifty centimeter terra cotta pots. He brushed his hand across the foliage of the Madagascar periwinkle, releasing an aroma, redolent, redolent with the bitterness of goldenseal. These periwinkle had their own medicinal scent, brewing a real battle now in his nostrils--a real competition between the Madagascar periwinkle, the basil, and the oleander.

Looking up, he saw the dominant central arch was carved from teak, columns, frames and all. There was in the wood itself, an incised arabesque pattern. Only faint light, illuminated the arch facades. The stairs led only to the central arch, while the two side arches had balustrades protecting their edges. The main dramatic lighting was inside the portico itself, highlighting the ceiling...beckoning to Chalmers, come, enjoy me.

9.5: Madge's Portico

Chalmers climbed up the stairs onto the portico. The wood ceiling was well lit, revealing intricate polychrome traceries of light mint green and cream. He paused, with his eyes he traced the ceiling woodwork...and then, without warning, that mystique, that fragrance arrived again...ever so gently weaving its way into his nostrils...jessamine hints he was sure...capturing his emotions...at the same time, the geometric pattern on the ceiling unleashed his memories...and for the briefest moment he and Madge were together again in a villa, in *la ville nouvelle*, Mequinez, Morocco, as they had been, decades ago, when together, they first discovered that magic, of night blooming jessamine, yes, indeed, he was sure, *Cestrum nocturnum*. The jessamine had snuck its way back into his memories, and firmly lodged there, quickly though briefly, carrying him away through time and space.

He looked at the balustrade to his right and noted that the continuous rows of double pink oleanders along the side wall had been replaced just beyond that balustrade, by two different plants of similar size at the portico corner. He walked over and inspected--*Cestrum nocturnum*--jessamine--night blooming jessamine--mystery solved. He paused, and inhaled, deeply. In short time, he remembered why, so many people found this fragrance, just too powerful. He looked across to the other side of the portico and saw two more *Cestrum nocturnum*.

Memories and emotions teased Chalmers. Was he smelling cedar wood, too? His eyes rose to inspect the interior ceiling details, which led him under a spectacular ribbed dome, that dissolved near the top into a tessellated full

muqarna treatment. The polychromes now including gold and turquoise and dark blue--and mint green and jade green--all uplighted by hidden lights. Suspended from the dome center, with just enough illumination to reveal the pattern was a brass lamp of substantial size, its metal worked in elegant Persian style with half palmettos, backed by a tracery of vines and tendrils. His eyes danced back and forth between the lamp patterns and the *muqarna* dome patterns, absorbing their wonderful pleasures.

The only thing to distract him was the overhead wood structure that led his eyes past the ribbed *muqarna* dome, via the wood details--the beams, the cross beams, the dados--to a *mishrabiya*²³ enclosed overlook, opening toward the west. The promise of a view pulled him through to the mesmerizing cut geometric, lace like patterns which traditionally decorate a projecting wooden *mishrabiya*. This *mishrabiya* was pierced by three arched openings that framed a spell binding view to the Gulf and the western horizon. Drawn to the view, he rested his hands on the balustrade rail and looked out at the thin crescent moon sitting softly, quietly and magically strong yet tender, still an hour above the horizon. He paused... the wind shifted, the night blooming jessamine returned and shut down all his senses...

His memories, which previously had only been taunting him from the edges, now surrounded and captured him...as he inhaled, he was in Morocco again, together with Madge, discovering that thick, velvet textured Tropic of Cancer violet, black sky...that very early waxing thin, so very slender, crescent moon, appearing to be drawn into position by the earth's gravity, yet, like a boat floating just above the horizon...the horizon still with a hint of crepuscular glow.

These were the experiences that had built their long term relationship...these walks, these simple joys, these simple garden explorations were at the very heart of their deep felt companionship...something they always enjoyed together. For Chalmers, alone, deep in this garden, melancholy flowed slowly at first, from some yet unmapped, corner of his heart, then not to be denied, came on like a flood...sad, yet sweet...he could hear her voice calling him...a dream in full bloom...he felt like he was home for the briefest instant...his throat contracted...his eyes lost focus...his breathing labored...all simultaneously overcome by the loss of her presence and by the beauty of the garden...there was hurt clutching at his heart...there was jessamine sweetness...there was a beautiful crescent moon, low in a velvet sky...and...somehow, somehow out of nowhere, the left side of his brain called out to him...his intelligence started his

²³ Mishrabiya is an Arabic word for an upper floor, open air, bay window composed of tightly patterned wood lattice work. It was originally developed to allow free flow of breezes, and to provide secure places from which women could watch, themselves unobserved, the public realm.

energy...reminding him...Liwa, the project. He shook himself. He returned to his Dubai reality, his Empty Quarter reality, his Liwa Qsar project.

Right, Chalmers thought, time to meet Jean-Claude in The Library.

EPISODE 10: LIBRARY MAJLIS

10.1: Back to Business

Chalmers had lingered, to say the very least, as he had walked through those gardens. He was now a bit late as he reached The Library. Entering, he was immediately calmed by the mingling fragrances of agar wood, sandalwood and amber, blended in a *bukhoor*--an incense, an incense that lightly infused the cool, dry and comfortable library air. He inhaled deeply two, three times, then felt simultaneously relaxed and focussed. Jean-Claude sitting, reading the local newspapers, saw him enter. He arose. They shook hands.

After exchanging greetings and sitting down, both agreed the best drink would be Moroccan fresh mint tea--especially since the fresh mint was grown locally in The Library gardens. The mix included a pinch of black tea, and refined white sugar chipped from large blocks--all to be prepared in front of them. The final presentation according to the menu, should include a seasonably available layer of fresh orange blossoms, floating on the top.

Proper Moroccan tea in a restaurant was always theater. The drama arrived as the waiter poured the tea from the pot to the small tea glasses, elongating the threadlike stream of tea to almost a meter, before closing it down so that not a drop was spilled during the pouring.

As it was poured, the smell of the steaming, fresh mint tea captivated. After the pouring ceremony, a cloth was removed from a small, colorfully hand painted, Moorish style earthen bowl. Inside the bowl were pure white and fresh orange blossoms, along with freshly picked, young mint sprigs. The waiter gently tonged them into the tea. The orange blossom fragrance overlapped the mint, and by scent alone refreshed nearly to sweet intoxication.

After sampling the hot tea and fully appreciating the fulsome, blended aromas, Chalmers reviewed with Jean-Claude all the key project and business players he had met²⁴. Jean-Claude explained how those players were related to the top members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family.

He pointed out, "While these relationships are never really obvious to many of the business people and workers here in the Emirates, behind the scenes, these

²⁴ No expatriate person or foreign company could live or work in the United Arab Emirates without an Emirati sponsor. In all business affairs, the Emirati sponsor was the final arbiter; and the position of that Emirati's family in social structure was important to any project's final success and failure.

are the relationships that keep everything ticking over--the relationships with roots deep into *Bedu* history, that guide the morals and ethics of this Emirate and the UAE.”

Jean-Claude explained, “It started with Sheik Zayed bin Khalifa bin Nahyan the First, in the nineteenth century and was consolidated by Sheik Zayed bin Sultan bin Nahyan, who, in the twentieth century, the late 1960s to be exact, successfully led the unification of the seven Emirates. It still continues today with the Nahyan family. These are the rulers of Abu Dhabi. And these are the rulers of the UAE. The leaders of the other six Emirates, and the Nahyans interact through majlis as has always been the tradition. Even though national government institutions and administrative procedures have been overlaid, underneath you will find the strong, fundamental bond is the evolving *Bedu* majlis tradition born from the longterm shared hardships.”

Jean-Claude explained further, “The success of the Emirati tribes, enduring and working through the climatic hardships, and the shortage of water has built a strength of character extremely unique.”

“Based upon these strengths, the Emiratis, have an internal pride that is rarely examined by the world's mainstream media. You can find references to it in books, written by authors like Wilfred Thesiger and Frauke Heard-Bey; but most mainstream writers, expat workers and businessmen alike choose the easy way--accepting the centuries-old, negative stereotypes of the *Bedu* character and overlaying them onto all contemporary business and workplace relationships. That stuff is good to know, but it will not get you to the core of people's motivations here.”

“In public, the Emiratis do not talk about it; but they do have a self consciousness about this modern world, its communications, and, its values.” Jean-Claude continued, “Emiratis think that modern, Western world values are not based on the strength of austerity, but rather, based on the relativity of excesses.”

Chalmers thought, then added, “Jean-Claude, this kind of cultural gap is a fundamental challenge in all work out here, at least that is how I have found it. For me, a three stage process has always worked: inform myself, then trust, but verify.”

The conversation paused.

10.2: Occam's Razor

Enjoying their pot of mint tea, Chalmers and Jean-Claude sat comfortably in a near silence, modulated in the background only by the delicate strings of a lute solo. The lute is known here as an oud²⁵. Its music is everything that the Empty Quarter isn't--gentle, delicate, controlled by humans. Riding on the delicately fluid currents of oud music, they absorbed the cultured atmosphere of the high-ceilinged library, its gentle, indirect lighting, and its softly colored walls covered, some with artifacts, some with contemporary Emirati art.

The artifacts were from the sands, including original botanical pen and ink drawings, with hand written notes detailing every aspect of the materials and growth of date palms, the *Phoenix dactylifera*. Also displayed on the walls in between those drawings were colorful hangings of old, handwoven cloth--the cloth used in and around a life of camels and temporary shelters as were common in the sands. On the wall, complimenting the cloth, was a selection of large format, black and white photographs, featuring *barasti* shelters. *Barastis* are built and woven with parts from the date palm and the mangrove. The photographs included *barastis* from the island Abu Al Abiad, from Al Ain, from Abu Dhabi and from Liwa. The *barasti* shelter photos demonstrated the need for shade, for ventilation and, it might arguably still be deduced, even with plentiful electricity and air conditioning in the country, a fundamental core for understanding a local approach to sustainability.

On the opposite two walls were exhibitions from two regional artists. One exhibit included the works of an Emirati lady, Najat Makki, whose colorful emotion-driven paintings were inspired by sand, sea and sky. The second exhibit included the works of another Gulf artist of world renown, Abdul Qader Al Rais--displaying a number of his paintings featuring doors and windows, emphasizing, in this region the unique and complex social, physical and metaphysical challenges of, inside and outside.

While Chalmers was meditating over these, he recalled the recent Ashura experience with Jean-Claude in Bahrain and their subsequent conversations. He suggested to Jean-Claude, "Despite what you say about mortification in Christian religions--the Philippines, Opus Dei--it is a very small minority, not like that very public side of Islam, the Shiite Ashura blood soaked, trance induced, *zanjil* flagellations. That pre-occupation with violence is almost as repugnant to this Western Christian as 11Sept2001, and the ongoing senseless murder of Muslims by other Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan this past decade or, for how long--how many hundreds of thousands were killed in the 1980s'

²⁵ An oud is a form of lute or mandolin played principally in Arab countries, also found with different names in Turkey, Iran and other non Arab countries.

Iraq Iran border war? How can anyone balance that heartless disregard for human life, with the beauty, the sensitivity of this library--the arts and crafts on display here?"

Jean-Claude observed, "It does uncover a basic human condition, doesn't it?"

They sat quietly for a moment, then Chalmers wondered out loud, "Jean-Claude, could all this UAE development of Westerner attracting tourism, Atlantis, the Louvre, the Guggenheim, be nothing more than an organized exercise in *da'wah*²⁶, an exercise simply intended to spread Islam?"

Jean-Claude recalled a similar conversation, he had had, with a young Emirati in Liwa, a couple years back. Jean-Claude recalled clearly, him saying, '*Jihad*²⁷ and *da'wah*, are simply both sides of the same coin--if one is convinced in his belief, he uses his natural abilities to convince others--thus *jihad* and *da'wah* exist, side by side.'

Jean-Claude suggested to Chalmers, "*Da'wah*, *taqqiyah*, as an infidel, a *kafir*, you can never be sure. What is it that keeps people from sharing trust, from sharing 100% trust? I think you are right Chalmers, in this kind of cross cultural business climate, when you say, inform yourself first, then trust, but verify. Or, others might say--you just have to be able to compartmentalize."

Chalmers thought, this could be said differently--know your enemy. He followed on wondering--is everyone he works with here, his friend--or his enemy? Business is not warfare--or is it? Cynicism and common sense mingle as uncomfortable friends some times, he thought with a smile. Then he commented in humor to Jean-Claude, "The Emiratis, they make it easy to come here to do business, the only thing they confiscate from you on entry is, Occam's Razor." They both had a jolly laugh, took a drink of mint tea, and became quiet again.

10.3: Theuns is in the House

Chalmers' mobile vibrated. He reached for it; but, before he could open the text message, Theuns van der Walt had found him. Chalmers introduced Jean-Claude to Theuns, explaining Jean-Claude's historical work in Liwa. Theuns was not particularly interested in historical work by others. Chalmers tried to

²⁶ *Da'wah*, an Arabic word, is an activity carried on by Muslims. It is a peaceful proselytizing to bring more people closer to their religion.

²⁷ *Jihad*, an Arabic word, is an activity carried on by Muslims. It is a struggle, a holy warlike activity to forcibly bring people under the influence of their religion.

lighten up the conversation, observing and remarking that for this Thursday evening, the end of the local work week, Theuns, was looking fresh and unusually relaxed.

Theuns pulled up a chair, moved slightly closer to them and privately shared, "Once a month, I come to this spa for a gentleman's facial. Most spas offer gentleman's facials and Thai massage, but most of them are done by Filipina girls. Here the girls are all Thai; and here, the gentleman's facials are special. These girls have all the hand skills." Theuns smiled, just short of a leer, and winked. He concluded, "So you asked me about my relaxed state, now you know."

Jean-Claude said nothing. Chalmers had to speak up, "C'mon Theuns, that story is so old. Here in Dubai, that was an urban legend five years ago."

"Stop with that urban legend crock, Chalmers. It's just because you have not been there. These hotels have more options than most people ever guess. Hotels are delicately discreet about these options for preferred clients. I have a South African friend, working as a Pastry Chef in this very hotel. He makes special creations for the Spa."

Theuns winked, smiled and said, "He makes zatar²⁸ croissants to order--not just any variety, but his own special mix--a traditional, Lebanese Gold Zatar--mmm-mmm-mmm--I'm feeling good just talking about them."

Chalmers interrupted, "Theuns, you're starting your own urban legend. Let's get down to business."

That closed it. Theuns focussed on Chalmers and got serious, "Now, Chalmers, how are you doing with the fix? I am counting on you. What have you found this week, regarding Liwa Qsar? You are in the game--we will have the result, right?"

Chalmers, took a sip from his mint tea, and lingered over the fragrance of the floating orange blossoms, making Theuns wait for it, then carefully explained, "It's possible; but it will be eight months of hard and dedicated work by a team. And some of the landscape contractor's people, obstructing impediments, may need replacing. And if I am to succeed on such short notice, your contracted

²⁸ *Zatar* is an Arabic word that describes a blend of herbs, sesame and salt found throughout the Middle East. The herbs vary with region prepared, often including local varieties of oregano, thyme and savory. These are spread on a piece of unleavened bread and sold as a cheap snack--fast food, old school style.

project management team, as well as your lower level internal CTF consensus-based management structure, will have to be ‘suspended’.”

Theuns was not satisfied. He was impatient, he wanted for an answer only ‘yes we can’. And despite his recent refreshed relaxation, he had no time for any details.

But Chalmers was emphatic, “Listen Theuns, you must keep your design managers and commercial bean counters away from me--and, give me line item sign off, on all landscape contractor invoices...”

Theuns interrupted and pushed, “Yes or no?”

Chalmers squared up to Theuns, and looking him directly in the eye, said, “Yes, definitely, it will happen! But, Theuns, please listen carefully. It will cost you for my full time presence over eight months--six months to soft opening²⁹ plus two more months to hard opening, eight months in all. It will also cost you for extra work by the contractor; but not a significant add for them--just enough to make up under-specified and improper consultant plants, and the special touches to get the ‘wow’ for the opening. I’ll keep the costs down by using only locally available materials, a max 12-15% cost add to the softscape, ok--and, none of that team-review, time wasting, agreed? Do we have a deal?”

Theuns looked into Chalmers’ eyes, and then, without comment nodded agreement. Quickly moving on, Theuns recommended to all a special energy drink, available only at The Library. Jean-Claude and Chalmers continued with their mint tea.

10.4: Emiratis

The unknown factor--the locals--the Emiratis--sedate, well dressed, dedicated family people--but, but.

Theun’s energy drink was being served, when his Emirati acquaintances walked in, all in white *kandouras*, traditional Emirati men’s wear, two in traditional white

²⁹ Soft opening for a destination resort is an advance opening with all construction complete, all supplies in place and all staff training complete. Then the only guests are those invited from management teams to test how it all operates, so that necessary adjustments can be made to all systems before the time of the grand opening, often two months later, such that the destination resort is perfect at grand opening for the public guests.

*gutras*³⁰, with black *aqals*³¹, and one, in a brown *hamdaneyah*³². They were all introduced. From their names it was clear that all three were immediate nephews and cousins of the ruling Abu Dhabi Nahyan family. One of them, Fairuz, in the brown *hamdaneyah*, when he saw Jean-Claude, treated him like old close friends, sharing a light nose-to-nose-touch greeting.

Jean-Claude introduced his old friend Chalmer to Fairuz. Fairuz was the person from Liwa, the student for whom Jean-Claude had advised and helped structure local ethnobotanical research. Jean-Claude said that no one knew the people, the plants and the sands of Liwa like Fairuz.

Coincidentally, Fairuz was also Theuns' acquaintance, who had been showing a special interest in the Liwa Qsar project. Fairuz and Theuns shook hands and exchanged greetings. Everybody was on the same page regarding the Liwa Qsar project; and for the time being, Theuns was paying a bit more attention to Jean-Claude. But when Fairuz' friends started talking football, Theuns became more interested in talking football with them.

Fairuz had returned a year or so ago from the US, where he had completed both his Masters and PhD at Harvard University, focussing on overlap shared in the domains of business management and ethnobotany.

He had just turned thirty. At five foot ten and 165 pounds, he was trim and fit. His black beard and mustache were neatly cropped, short, in a style becoming his family and their position of power. He spoke softly, like the well-educated gentlemen he was, radiating command and control as often seen in a person groomed for leadership, and appropriately confident to accept it.

Now he was finding his way forward to a proper position in the Abu Dhabi Emirati hierarchy, to marriage, and to fulfill his destiny to improve his country and its way of life. He was diligent, patient--and he was fond, youthfully fond of flash cars--and driving them hard.

³⁰ *Gutra* is an Arabic word that describes the traditional white or checked head scarves worn by Emirati men.

³¹ *Aqal* is an Arabic word that describes the traditional black bands and ties worn over the *gutra* by Emirati men.

³² *Hamdaneyah* is an Arabic word that describes a traditional cloth head wrap used instead of and without *gutra* and *aqal* by Emirati men. The cloth and color vary by season and by gentleman.

10.5: Sustainable Rimal

What happens when popular jargon meets a larger than life, a larger than time, landscape? What is sustainable about something that is ‘always shifting’? Or, rather, is ‘always shifting’ the most appropriate definition for sustainable? Is sustainable larger than time, is it larger than eternity? Ha!! The more attention one pays to popular jargon, the more folly one absorbs!

Fairuz, Jean-Claude and Chalmers had much in common. They shared interest, yet varied perspectives, on the sands and on the *Bedu* life style.

They sat down together. Fairuz asked for dates and *kaouwa*, Arabic coffee, which was roasted, ground and prepared on a side table. Chalmers and Jean-Claude joined him. Traditionally taken in restrained amount, *kaouwa* and dates were a sweet, soft, tender, buttery, room temperature date washed down with a thimble full of the hottest, bitterest, freshly brewed, cardamom flavored coffee.

Chalmers took the opportunity to explore a topic, a topic that was on his mind since hearing Kelvin Isley the other day describe his experience of an almost unearthly, powerful, rhythm of the heat, emanating from the sands. He drew on Thesiger’s recognition of the exceptionally strong power of the sands. Thesiger had observed in the *Bedu*, people intensely occupied with the sands, they never commented on the beauty of the sands, the sky, the night, or the sunset.

Chalmers asked, “Both before, and, since the coming of Islam, I have read that *djinni*, spirits, have resided as unusual forces in the sands. Fairuz, I am curious, is there anything about the *djinni* in the sands that could be a good reference for landscape architects these days, sustainability, or otherwise?”

Jean-Claude quickly added some facts, “If I may, on the sustainability part, for centuries, it can be concluded that without oil and electricity, this Abu Dhabi Emirate region sustains at most, about 25,000 humans, but with very significant, serious hardships.”

“Interesting this concept of sustainability,” Fairuz started, “I agree with your numbers, Jean-Claude; but, the quality of their life, the tenuous nature of the supply of food and water made life here almost like a, a penal colony.”

Fairuz suggested, “Current environmentalists, mostly from the temperate Western world seem to romanticize a simpler life style--pre-oil--pre-industrial. Life here was hell, even 50 years ago, a day in-day out major struggle for existence.”

Jean-Claude added, “Fairuz, along the same line, I recently read a novel written by an Emirati lady, born in the 1940s. *SandFish* was the title and the lady’s name was Maha Gargash. She described her life as a youth and their small herd of goats in the foot hills of the Hajar mountains. She went on writing that after marriage, her move to the Dubai region, with its dependence on pearling--impossible hardships, her whole life--absolutely impossible hardships!”

Chalmers speculated, “But people, people do always find some small pleasures even with hardships all around them, right?”

Fairuz replied, “If your pleasure is finding brackish water for survival--that is the simple pleasure that keeps people, as Thesiger observed, from enjoying the sunset, from seeing beauty in the sands. The Empty Quarter meant death was in your face, using an American idiom, 24/7/365.”

Fairuz, then, rhetorically asked, “Now that we have technology to produce water for health, for cleanliness, for fresh fruits and vegetables, for healthier animals, for pleasure gardens, who, who in their definition of sustainability, will deny us these?”

Jean-Claude suggested, “Your question, Fairuz, if I may, is it not similar to many other developing countries currently chafing at the developed world--chafing at the ‘one-world’ impositions from those same ‘textbook environmentalists’, who ask sacrifices of the developing countries?”

Chalmers then offered, “Could what you say not be reworded into some kind of post-modern imperialism? Or maybe, maybe it is just good old fashioned totalitarianism--we know what is good for you, now just take it!?”

Fairuz, speaking with a gentleman’s clarity, evenness and measured passion, looked into the eyes of both Jean-Claude and Chalmers, then offered, “I won’t speak for others now, only for Emiratis, only for the *Bedu*. I find it offensive that engineers and planners from the temperate climate West bring their standards, their self-serving bases of calculations, their romantic fantasies to our country, and demand us, in their own polite and politically correct language to for example, cut our water use by 50%. Let them come and live in the sands, the old way for two months. Before self righteously engaging in discussion, about how much water Emiratis should or shouldn’t use, let them arrive at Liwa, travel overland on foot, on camel from Salalah, instead of stepping off an Emirates 767, and taking a BMW 7-series to a five star hotel!”

Normally, the world saw the impeccable, gentlemanly public face of the Emiratis in their international attempt to be seen as part of the world wide push

for sustainability. Here, in this intimate private discussion, Fairuz had clearly just revealed an educated, though usually unspoken local reality, contrasting it with the politically correct, popular sustainability sound bites.

Fairuz then asked, “What is sustainability in a 67,000 square kilometer Emirate, that is 100% desert, and never sustained more than 25,000 people? There is no such thing as desertification when we are--when we start with 100% desert!?”

He continued, “Is it not a symptom of strength and significant affluence, if one can detach from the realities of the sands and abstractly view them as beauty, as an object of enjoyment? In this respect, Sheik Mohammed of Dubai uses beauties and strengths of nature often in his Nabati poems.”

Fairuz said, “You guys, you guys must understand there is a ‘special tapestry’ of the sands that can never be known by consultants, amateurs, tourists to and in the UAE.”

He concluded, “That tapestry is woven into our souls by our ancestry. Its weave is not easily revealed, except among brothers. And most outsiders can not see it, even if it is laid before them.”

EPISODE 11: VILLA MAJLIS

11.1: Garden Terrace

Theuns had not heard a word of Fairuz' comments--and probably wouldn't have even cared anyway. He and the other guys had gotten into sports, football. They had sat down at a large bay window nook at the one end of The Library that had a small bank of 11" color LCD touch screen displays, each with individual Bluetooth wireless headsets. They were talking about local football, the UAE President's Cup Final that night. Because one of the teams had a South African trainer, Theuns was all cranked up.

One of Fairuz' friends walked over and suggested to Fairuz and everybody, "Why don't we all go to one of The Library's private villas to order Lebanese dinner and to watch, on a 52" plasma flat screen, the cup football match of the season--it's Al Ain vs Al Shabab! There we can eat, talk and watch sports."

All agreed. After the villa was prepared, The Library staff led the way.

The villa, a two room plan on a single level, was elegant, tastefully detailed, but perhaps approaching too closely the edge of extravagant. Entering the front door, a guest could pause in a comfortable foyer before the majlis. The main room, the majlis, or living room, had about fifty square meters and was furnished with the huge 52" flat screen TV, cinema speaker system, couches, potted plants, tables and chairs, grouped casually--all comfortable--all elegant--all welcoming. Discreetly off the foyer, there was a guest powder room and a 'service' kitchenette, with its own separate outside service door access and its own toilet.

The 'service' kitchenette was more a well-provisioned galley for room service. It included a compact series of counters and collapsible tables, to keep things warm, keep things cool, just out of sight, around the corner of the majlis itself, but immediately available to service the guests, such as in presentation of a Lebanese dinner, including fresh warm bread on demand.

Through two huge, heavy, sliding, but smoothly rolling and nested, hand-carved teak doors, the majlis connected to the second room, a bedroom. In the bedroom, about thirty six square meters, the guest would find a super-sized king bed, a private nook seating area with three chairs and a table, and a massive ensuite bathroom with jacuzzi, separate rain shower, walk-in closets, etc. The villa style was a blend of the best of structural wood from Bali with the best of architectural detailing from the Alhambra, finished in the Emiratis' cultural

code of visual shapes, forms and proportions--all softly inviting, in restrained colors.

For Chalmers, though, the real treat came when he discovered a private garden terrace, accessible only from the bedroom. He slid open the glass door to the terrace. It was a sensual, tastefully assembled, intimate garden of breathtakingly beautiful plants--water--architecture--furnishings--lighting--all in a micro-climatically improved environment.

The garden, about the same size as the bedroom, featured exotic tropical plants, fragrant gingers, bromeliads, dwarf bananas in variety, and to top it off a well-established *Bauhinia galpinii* and a *Tibouchina granulosa*, both luxuriant in bloom. The tibouchina was large, shrub like, actually more like a small tree with carefully selected and well pruned multiple trunks, a very well proportioned artistic presence. The bauhinia was a bushy shrub, kind of rough, rampant. It had started clambering through the lower branches of the tibouchina. The resultant intermingled blending of floral purples and oranges, softly pulsated, delicately vibrated before Chalmers' eyes, like a cloud of dancing butterflies.

Chalmers found this garden experience dizzyingly beautiful, and technologically advanced. He sat down on an outdoor cushioned chair and saw, tucked into the plants, a small and exquisitely detailed Islamic themed *chadar*³³ water feature, integrated with a just barely discoverable, and totally private jacuzzi and outdoor shower. All the terrace garden features were comfortably located under a high-tech, movable, shading canopy which silently opened and closed automatically, according to real-time sensors for temperature, humidity, wind and sun position. This high-tech feature was hidden within a traditional *barasti* shade structure that, with soft indirect lighting blended the entire garden terrace into a culturally appropriate work of art.

The enclosing perimeter privacy wall had random insert combinations of colored and lighted glass blocks along with lesser accents of similarly proportioned fenestration--a blend of restrained cubism with modern arabesque. As the privacy wall reached the edge of the paved terrace, there was an enlarged insert, 16:9 format--a touch screen digital display with the title, 'How this Garden Works'. Chalmers followed the story sequence which explained the *barasti* micro-climate modification--the contained planting soil--the recycling of irrigation water--the mulch and compost program that permitted acid loving plants to grow sustainably.

³³ A chadar is a Persian garden water feature that translates as a shawl--a thin layer of water, a thin sheet of water that flows over a patterned surface of tiles, the tiles helping to create the ripples in the surface flow, creating a shawl or chadar appearance with the tile and water combination.

Chalmers thought it was useful information geared to the casual guest--a garden interpretation--a gutsy IT inclusion.

11.2: Cross Cultural

Different cultures in the same landscape--different landscapes under the same culture--cultures change--landscapes change--in the long run the discussion was little different than a dog chasing its tail.

Inside, Theuns and his two Emirati acquaintances settled in for their football match. Jean-Claude and Fairuz arrived outside in the garden to sit and talk with Chalmers.

Jean-Claude recalled a recent quote he had read from Paul Bowles, “You both know Paul Bowles don’t you--an American author, now deceased, who lived nearly forty years of his life in Morocco--writing short stories that bridged the gap between traditional Moroccan culture and modern Western culture?”

Chalmers was more absorbed in something hidden in a garden corner, a collection of gingers just beginning to flower. Fairuz answered Jean-Claude, saying, “Go ahead.”

“Bowles explained that he found a difference in the way the two cultures lived with the concept of time. Bowles wrote, ‘In America or Europe the day is divided into hours, and one has appointments. Here in the Magreb the day isn't measured; it simply goes by. If you see people, it's generally by accident. Time is merely--more or less, and everything is--perhaps. It's upsetting if you take it seriously. Otherwise it's relaxing because there's no need to hurry. Plenty of time for everything.’”

Jean-Claude then asked, “Fairuz, do you see this difference in perception of time as having any impact on the changes in Emirati lifestyle during the modernization of the last forty or fifty years?”

Fairuz thought for a minute, and said, “In fact, the prayer calls set a diurnal, a daily rhythm that has not changed at all. But I have detected a change, something like that, though derived from the harshness of the landscape conditions here, in the Empty Quarter. Movement and activities have always been driven by the need to survive and the climate--it is so intense--it forbids movement, it forbids activities.”

He continued, “With dependable electricity, water and air conditioning, people are now more uniform in daily activities throughout all seasons of the year.”

Chalmers was listening now, “By harshness, do you mean a harshness like frozen winters in temperate climates?”

“Not exactly, you have to move to keep warm in temperate winters. Here it is reverse and opposite. Winter is our most comfortable season. During the summer, moving exhausts resources and induces stress. Climate used to affect time more in the past than it does today.” Fairuz paused. He let his eyes be hypnotized, by the refreshing play of a thin layer of water, rippling over the raised, fishscale patterns--over the *chadar*’s translucent--gold-flecked--green and blue glass mosaics. They all sat, without speaking.

Jean-Claude asked Fairuz, “Then your Western consultants’ pre-occupation with daily schedules these days, does or does not cause a fundamental misunderstanding at the base of communications?”

Fairuz answered, “We are making every effort to improve the quality of life for our people. We appreciate the attention our consultants give to their careful use of time.”

He continued, “There may always be communication barriers due to the extreme differences in cultural heritage, but these can be worked out.”

Chalmers, with just the slightest hint of temerity, said, “Time aside, Fairuz, may I ask you this? Regarding cultural differences, or, let's say, cultural gaps, what do you think about the ‘*kafir* gap’? You know, the fact that Muslims are taking advice and instruction from non-believers? Does that ever get in the way, Fairuz?”

Fairuz turned his eyes from the glass mosaic, *chadar* water feature, to look at Chalmers. The Bose speakers were softly emitting the staccato hand clapping of a traditional Emirati pearling song. As it finished, Fairuz pulled his ears away from that, too, and said to Chalmers, “I was educated at Harvard, and I am proud of my education. When it comes to *kafirs*, it is just like you say in the market place--buyer beware--*caveat emptor*--we listen, we question, we discuss, we decide and we take action. It is just that simple.”

Fairuz then paused again, this time letting the delicately soothing sound of the trickling water absorb his senses above all else. His eyes began wandering among the healthy--the beautifully flowering plants. He asked, “Tell me, Jean-Claude, how can anyone say we must only use native desert plants in our

gardens, when we can have this beauty we are sharing, right now, right here in front of us, in this beautiful jewel of a garden?”

The rhetorical question silenced both Jean-Claude and Chalmers.

It was abundantly clear to all three that the desert plants were stubborn, survivor plants. And it was equally clear that the desert plants were part of the desert ecosystem, with reptiles, insects and arachnids, that endanger the lives of humans. Household garden plants of civilized life should be soft, delicate and inspirational in beauty, touch and sensual seductiveness, or at the very least useful, for family food, for family health. The plants of a civilized home, would never be the desert plants.

11.3: Emiratis Challenge Theuns

Sharing food, the sharing of food among humans, it is always an interesting cultural insight. Here, these days on the edges of the Rub Al Khali, it is always a jolly bit of fun, of plentitude!

Chalmers noticed a burst of activity inside, in the majlis. The Lebanese dinner was being set out. They all went inside for cold mezze³⁴.

They ate leisurely, and were about to sit down for the second half of the game when Jean-Claude took a phone call that required his departure. As he prepared to leave, he arranged to have Chalmers' overnight bag removed from his SUV and brought to the villa. Then he apologized to all, leaving them to watch football and finish dinner.

As they finished their dinner with Lebanese sweets, then coffee, they all watched the second half together. The game dominated conversations until after it had been concluded, when Fairuz and his friends turned discussion back to CTF and their projects. They suggested that Theuns might find it useful to understand a bit of the life that Emiratis would be leading as they used the new projects, those projects his company was developing and building.

Theuns rejected the proposition and explained, “At CTF, we pay the world's best consultants to make those observations and design accordingly.”

³⁴ Mezze may indeed have Turkish roots, but it is used regularly in the Arabian peninsula to describe both hot and cold appetizer types of dishes, each in plentitude often filling a large table as guests sit down and help themselves to begin the main evening meal.

“You are missing the point,” Fairuz’ friend said, “How can you determine if they are right or wrong in their conclusions?”

His impatience and short temper emerging, Theuns, the only one drinking alcohol after dinner, let the liquor show in his curt response, “That is what you guys are for--you Emiratis have to say what is right or wrong!”

They persisted in a gentlemanly way and finally suggested, “Let us all go out to the desert--the weather is beautiful. Our uncle has a huge farm just near Al Ain. Let us show you some customs in our own home.”

Theuns was still not convinced.

Chalmers on the other hand, thought, a rare opportunity indeed.

They continued to press Theuns, “This is required for you to be managing the buildings of our future.”

Then Theuns saw an angle, and, now was thinking, “This might be fun.”

He suggested, “Maybe a friend of mine from our Marketing Department in the office can come, too? I’ll call him.”

Chalmers, recalling he had a flight out of Abu Dhabi at 3:30AM, checked his watch, then offered his apologies, and bowed out.

He told Theuns he had to leave town briefly to finish up his last project over the next days. In reality, it was his trip to Singapore to pick up some silk textiles for Madge. He promised Theuns he would be back before the end of next week to personally hand-carry the Liwa Qsar project external finishes to success for CTF.

Fairuz, his car VVIP³⁵ parked just near the villa, bowed out, too, and offered to drive Chalmers to the airport.

11.4: Bond

As Theuns, along the other two Emiratis, took off to pick up Theuns’ friend and head out to the desert, Fairuz smiled. With a sly, knowing smile, he looked at Chalmers and suggested, “A night in the desert with their second uncle, Shaikh

³⁵ VVIP is an acronym for Very Very Important Persons. Who are VVIPs? Often they are members of the ruling families and their invited guests.

Elam would be better for Theuns, than any of Sir Richard Francis Burton's sixteen volumes of '*1001 Arabian Nights*'. In fact, it might be just exactly what Theuns needs."

Meanwhile, Chalmers loaded his bag in the back of Fairuz', Cayenne TurboS--Lumma-XXX-tuned--all a soft pearlescent taupe outside--with carbon fibre accents--matching taupe 22 inch wheels--the 'de rigueur' low number plate 050/•••, and, under the ventilated hood, a bored and stroked, supercharged, 710hp engine. Chalmers, absorbing the tricked-out combination of beauty and sheer power in this vehicle again thought, back in the Middle East, oil style.

He realized time was short for boarding and asked Fairuz how were they going to travel the 140km and arrive at the airport on time.

Fairuz said, "It is simple, haven't you heard of The 23 Club?"

"The 23 Club? No, tell me."

"The 23 Club is exclusive. It is Emiratis only; and, it is not official. It is, how do you say, word of mouth, so I am not really surprised you haven't heard of it. It is exclusive only for those who travel between Dubai and Abu Dhabi in twenty three minutes or less."

"What??!?" Chalmers was astonished.

He knew it was a bit more than 140 kilometers between the two cities. He knew that between the cities, the Sheik Zayed Road speed limit was posted at only 120. He also knew that many expats drove it regularly between 130 and 160. And from time to time he had seen the fast lane used for 200-220. But twenty three minutes, that must mean--nearly 300kilometers an hour!?

Fairuz explained, "It usually is done by the 'more sensible among us' in the middle of the night, between 1AM and 4AM, like right now--a time when in general very few expatriate workers are out on the roads."

As he finished, they pulled out of The Library, encountered only a car or two until they reached Jbel Ali, after which there was no longer any traffic.

Sheik Zayed Road had a wide secure median, limited access, six lanes in each direction, four travel lanes and two fully paved shoulders. Fairuz got into lane three and set the automatic speed control at 250.

“Fairuz, this is too much, even though the road is wide, clear, empty--even though the road quality is excellent and there are high lux street lights all the way--I am seriously edgy at this speed on a public road.”

Fairuz said, “There are a few of us who are disappointed because even though our country has built excellent roads, they are heavily used most of the time by the huge number of expatriate workers.”

“Traditionally,” he added, “we are accustomed to open spaces, moving whenever and wherever we want. At this time of night, with no other traffic, we can enjoy the driving, the weather is fine--be brave.”

He pulled out his *midwakh*, his pipe, and asked, “Chalmers, do you smoke?”

Chalmers, still edgy about the speed they were driving, but trying to relax and work through it, said, “Yeah, a little, from time to time.”

“Good,” Fairuz said, “try this. It will help calm you. We will be there before you know it.”

Chalmers, trying to forget that they were going 250kph, watched Fairuz load the small bowl of the short pipe. As he was observing the small amount of tobacco per bowl, sufficient only for one or two inhales, of all things, a *Blues Brothers* dialogue flashed into his mind; then he thought, with a smile to himself, this time we are ‘not’ on a mission for God. A bit more relaxed from the ‘strained’ chuckle, he watched as Fairuz knocked out the spent ashes into the ashtray.

Fairuz then told Chalmers, “These kinds of pipes, *midwakh*, come from Iran originally. This stem is ebony, an antique with these inlaid mother of pearl floral patterns. The mouthpiece and bowl are both modern, brushed stainless steel.”

“While it may remind you of the longer *kij*³⁶ pipes from the Magreb, you can rest assured there is no *kif* in this *midwakh*.”

He handed the filled pipe and lighter to Chalmers.

³⁶ *Kif* is an Arabic word from the Magreb, western North Africa. Traditionally it means finely cut marijuana leaves and flowers, blended with similarly fine cut tobacco, then smoked in small bowl pipes.

“You’ll find in this *midwakh*, the *dokha*³⁷ I like to smoke,” Fairuz continued, “*laf raas*, it is not a fruity sheesha³⁸. It is a strong, and finely cut blend...”

As Fairuz was finishing his description, Chalmers inhaled. The tobacco and herb *dokha* mixture immediately captured his head and senses...he was swimming...deep water...under water...in the midst of that dizzy gasping for air...Chalmers saw, suddenly in the middle of the road ahead what appeared to be the figure of a man with his arms up. The thumping, screeching brakes of a big time panic stop turned it all to black...and silence.

³⁷ *Dokha* is local Arabic dialect to describe local tobacco mixtures.

³⁸ *Sheesha* is Arabic from Egypt popularly used to define variably the pipe, the fruit flavored tobacco or the whole setting of smoking hookahs, waterpipes, a very popular public and social activity throughout the Arabian peninsula.

EPISODE 12: EPILOGUE

Whoever has seven Ajwat Al Madinah dates every morning,
he will not be harmed that day by poison or magic.
--Saheeh Al Bukhaaree

12.1: Public Record

Two weeks later the following article appeared, a couple pages deep, in the daily local newspaper, Emirates News:

“Highway collision leaves one dead, five injured

29 May 2010

Emirates News Staff Reporter

Five Asians were injured and one killed on late Thursday evening in an accident on the Shaikh Zayed Road near Ghantout. The tragedy took place around 2:30AM and involved a truck and a vehicle opposite the Ghantout Restaurant in the direction Abu Dhabi.

A vehicle traveling from Dubai collided with a small truck that had broken down in the middle of the road. The truck driver was killed on the spot.

Traffic police and ambulances were sent immediately to the scene to secure the area. The crash happened because the car was speeding and not keeping a safe distance, said Brigadier Saleh Al Muhairi, Director General of Abu Dhabi Police, who supervised the rescue mission. Brigadier Al Muhairi urged motorists to abide by the traffic safety regulations and to adhere to the speed limit.”

About eight weeks later the following article appeared, on the bottom fold of the front page of the Emirates News:

“Shaikh Elam given juice spiked with drugs: witness

18 July 2010

Emirates News Senior Reporter

A court acquitted Shaikh Elam of assaulting a South African business man after three witnesses testified that he was “intentionally drugged without his knowledge” prior to the assault.

The Al Ain Court of First Instance concluded [based on witnesses’ statement and investigations conducted by the police and public prosecution] that prior to the incident, Shaikh Elam sat with South African T.v.d.W., in the resthouse of his palace where a colleague of T.v.d.W., B.N. secretly put a drug in his juice. A witness named A.A.R. testified that he spotted B.N. putting pills in the juice which he served to Shaikh Elam. A.A.R. stated that Shaikh Elam acted normally until he drank the juice after which his behaviour changed and [he] acted strangely,” read the verdict sheet.

The court verdict also said: “The jury concluded that Shaikh Elam was unaware of his acts and had no control over his behaviour because he was given intoxicating drugs and mind-affecting substances without any knowledge from his side or knowledge about its content and effects. The court was further convinced that T.v.d.W. and his colleague orchestrated the incident and videotaped it secretly and they broadcast it after they failed to blackmail Shaikh Elam. The court acquitted Shaikh Elam for lack of responsibility over his behaviour.

The judgement confirms that the tape which was broadcast is not admissible evidence and that it had been tampered with. The court had cleared Shaikh Elam of endangering the life of South African business man T.v.d.W., and of sexually abusing him with a stick.

The South African business men were sentenced to five years in jail after the court convicted them of possessing drugs to carry out a criminal act, endangering the life of Shaikh Elam [they mixed the drug with his drink and served it to him], defaming and insulting Shaikh Elam by broadcasting what the bill of charges termed “slandorous videotape”.

12.2: Return

Mid-December 2010, and Chalmers had just settled down into his business class seat on his flight back home. He was looking forward to Christmas in the mountains with his wife, Madge. As he sat down, he couldn't tell which troubled him more, the stiffness in his back from the automobile accident, or, the mental and physical weariness of eight months, everyday in the Empty Quarter, under the relentless sun, cajoling, arm twisting everyone on the team.

Liwa Qsar was completed, even without Theuns. The soft opening was 2 October, and the official grand opening was 1 December. It was grueling. It was accomplished, another project under his belt. But, by Chalmers point of view, the Empty Quarter, being what it was, could never be considered conquered, by this project, or, by any project. Even after eight months living and working every day in the Empty Quarter, Chalmers found it...too large, too old, too unapproachable, and too unknown. Despite the successful project, his Empty Quarter experience had been one of strange, impending suffocation... the Rub al Khali was always trying to take something from him, trying to constrain something that should not be constrained...he couldn't really put his finger on it.

Chalmers tried to make himself comfortable in his seat. He asked the hostess for two individual, mini Chivas Regal 25s, one glass with ice and a second glass, without ice.

He opened the first Chivas 25, poured it over the ice, and drained it. Immediate relief. The second he poured neat into the room temperature glass. He let it sit. This one he drank very slowly, savoring the marzipan note, the rich milk chocolate note, thoroughly absorbing its smooth finish. Empty Quarter tensions melted away, as did his memory of originally imagined 'windows of insight' and 'doors of opportunity'.

Simply, he was glad to be on the way back home.

Chalmers relaxed for the first time in eight months. His carry-on bag was in the overhead. He smiled recalling its contents. His trip to Singapore had never happened. And the work became so hectic; but, he had taken a couple days to visit Oman, searching for some hand-embroidered cotton for Madge.

He had flown to Muscat and rented a car to drive two hours into the mountains to Ibra, a city that predated Islam. He went especially to visit the women's souk

there, looking for hand embroidered *kimmas*, *khanja* shawls and *lihafs*³⁹. But he found the souk open only to women, no men allowed. So, with fortunate help from the local Ibra tourist office he was chaperoned to a girls school, where he was able to select a number of cotton pieces, each hand embroidered with a wide range of designs, both traditional and modern. He knew Madge would be surprised, and pleased, to see this skillful Ibra craftwork. The more he thought about it, the more his eyes became...redder, with hope.

Chalmers texted Madge: “Off the ground on schedule, and on the way. Love, E.”

A special, glossy magazine *Liwa Qsar* insert, from the Emirates News sat on his lap:

³⁹ *Kimmas*, *khanja* shawls and *lihafs* are hand woven, embroidered and brocaded Omani cloth ware for head, shoulders and special family events.

“Desert Queen
12 December 2010
Emirates News Features Editor

Mystifying, beautiful and pure is how seasoned desert people would describe Liwa. Tucked away in the heart of Abu Dhabi, Liwa is the oasis of the Rub' Al Khali [Empty Quarter], the world's largest stretch of uninterrupted desert which touches Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen. The same Rub' Al Khali known for its 300 meter high dunes, fiery sunsets and colors, and romanticized landscape in Wilfred Thesiger's travel writings, The Arabian Sands.

The sandy orange and red canvas is the setting for Zantara's latest resort, Liwa Qsar. With a five star luxury brand name and a location as true to the land as the Rub' Al Khali, the design order of the day was luxury, tradition and heritage combined.

Many hotels are designed for guests, but Liwa Qsar has also been designed for the Emirati people to remind them of where they dwell and who they are. Liwa Qsar goes beyond creating a sense of place: it embodies a culture and way of life, and the vast romantic desert which shape both.

At the opening, Chairman of CTF, Shaikh Sirhan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, proudly announced their concept. “This is more than just an extraordinary luxury resort; this is a symbol of our highly respected Arabian hospitality and deep-rooted culture. This project is outstanding in its use of native plants in the desert and its assembling of all historical varieties of Liwa date palms.”

Chalmers fell asleep--without reading it.

EPISODE 13: PILGRIMAGE

Chalmers had a two hour train ride from the Zurich flughaven to home. Refreshed from his deep sleep on the flight, he used the train ride to collect his thoughts and make some final notes about his just completed Liwa Qsar project.

He jotted down the names of the key players and reviewed the history of their parts in the project: Theuns van der Walt, Geoffrey Tate, Bankley Cuthbert, Esquire, Jean-Claude Thibaut, Kelvin Isley, Bob Rosenwinkel, Marwan Abourachid, Thomas George, Fairuz...

Then he summarized, in voice memos to his phone, their contributions as follow, for his professional project file.

13.1: Jean-Claude Thibaut

What can I say about him? Jean-Claude Thibaut and I have known each other almost 20 years. His mind is untamed and his senses take him off in any direction--but his heart is good. Through him I met Fairuz; and Fairuz got me out of some hot water. That one connection alone was worth all Jean-Claude's wanderings.

In fact on our visit to the Liwa Oasis, after I finished with all my meetings, I had to wait three hours for Jean-Claude. Where was he? Still searching for firebush, for gazelle habitat. I just can not get in the habit of allowing myself that kind of luxury with my time. This project was like most of my projects, bound strictly by the clock to a schedule.

Jean-Claude flew out of Dubai the very same night that Fairuz and I had the auto accident. I did not hear again from him until some time in October when he sent an email. He was in London at Kew with some colleagues. He asked me how the project was going.

In fact, now, I have no idea where he is. That is normal.

13.2: Bankley Cuthbert, Esquire

What a character he was. I finally got to meet that gentleman at the Emirates Golf Club in August. He was a character right out of P.G. Wodehouse. When he spoke, I felt like I was on a movie set. But he did help me when he shared his own decades long experience with

hybrid and 'native' grasses, soils and irrigation regimes. That helped me make sure we planted the right hybrid grass for the private lawns around the swimming pools in the Liwa Qsar VVIP villas.

13.3: Geoffrey Tate

The LandID Regional Director, following our first meeting at The Walk, I never saw him again. His Philipino guys on site efficiently handled the paperwork, including closing out the as builts--no questions, no problems.

But he did call once, about a month into my work on the project. He had learned that the shop drawing planting plans had plant selection changes. He started to make some noise about modifications to the LandID approved design drawings. I cut him off saying he had one of two choices: 1)forcefully and with high visibility maintain his original design then watch 40% of his plants die in the first six months; or, 2)just be quiet and let me finish it properly, without additional costs to him.

In his own way, Geoffrey knew how these projects worked, that is, he knew when he had to make noise and when he had to back off, to be quiet. And that is how he kept his regional workload growing.

13.4: Kelvin Isley

Kelvin was the Kiwi whom the desert had tried to possess. He ended up being a logistics wizard. I went in and told him how much the extra cost would be for the special planting upgrade for opening day--and he pushed it through without a squawk with the quantity surveyors, cost and contract people.

I got my work done on time and at the expected quality. He had nothing to say during our infrequent meetings on site, other than thankful and kind professional words.

But I did run into him at a CTF social function following the soft opening. That night on the sixth floor restaurant and garden terrace of a downtown Abu Dhabi hotel, he excused himself from his wife and friends and walked me outside, overlooking a huge mangrove conservation area.

More than anything, I remember the mangroves gave off an aroma--somewhere just the wrong side, the disgusting side of medicinal--damn near choked my nasal passages and throat. Anyhow, Kelvin and I talked again about his morphogenetic experiences in the Empty Quarter. He told me about a team of Egyptian and American researchers who, with the Crown Prince, came to his Liwa Qsar office one day. The Crown Prince had flown in by helicopter as usual. But the researchers, they came in with a caravan of eight desert camo Humvees.

And did they have the equipment--sensors of all sorts--realtime satellite uplink to an overhead satellite sending realtime data via numerous digital filters. They had drones, a whole team just to program, fly and monitor drones. He told me, if anything, it looked like military. He told them about his morphogenetic experiences and pointed them out on the aerial photo, giving them northings and eastings. Then they left--Crown Prince and his security helicopters as well as the Humvee caravan. Never heard back anything.

So in the end, I keep in touch with Kelvin, a real landscape man from the Kiwi South Island. He has taken on another CTF project, this time on the Gulf, out on Sadiyat Island.

I wonder whether he will ever go back out to wander the Empty Quarter.

13.5: Bob Rosenwinkel

Just two days ago, I heard he was off to a new project, some place in North Africa. He used to find me out on the site, about once a month. He would drive up in his big white Lexus SUV, roll down the window and ask me a question.

He always had a question. His questions always showed his thorough understanding of the construction process as it related to the landscape, drainage, water quality, water proofing. And he always pushed the other trades to get their stuff off the site for landscaper access. I sat in from time to time with his scheduler whose meeting was very short, simple and direct with the sub contractor's site superintendents. There was a big site plan on the meeting table. Each site area had been outlined in red when the

last trade was to finish and the landscaper was to start. Rosenwinkel and his team knew the importance of healthy landscape on opening day.

I'd call his approach helpful bullying--probably something Americans do well traditionally--being in charge without being arrogant--maybe a tad naive, but never offensive. I'd be pleased to work with him again, any job, anywhere.

13.6: Fairuz

Fairuz was the champion of this project. In the oil rich countries, I have found it rare in project work to have anyone other than a contractor's sponsor take interest in the project. Fairuz was an exception. Without him, this project may have been an opening day disaster.

With two months until soft opening, Theuns replacement issued an instruction received from her Emirati management that all plants at the Liwa Qsar project be native. I contacted Fairuz and he agreed to meet me at The Library. I explained that there were no native plant nurseries in the UAE. I also explained that all of the project plants had excellent drought resistance. He suggested that we keep our plant palette as it was.

We discussed the ethnobotany of the Liwa Oasis. He suggested that among our 1,000 date palms on the project, we should build some clusters, some clumps based on locally sourced varieties. Fairuz then arranged to have local land owners donate offshoots of known historical varieties and locally popular varieties, all named.

Then I arranged with the landscape contractor to receive them, label them and plant them at important and appropriate areas within the project. Fairuz then made sure that the managing Emiratis and CTF leaders adjusted their expectations for native plants. The value of his assistance was inestimable.

Just two weeks ago I saw Fairuz on the dais with the Crown Prince and other VVIP Emiratis for the official hard opening of Liwa Qsar.

13.7: Theuns van der Walt

While I did not agree with him in many of his personal predilections, I did like his handling of job items. He knew how to put the right resources in the right place to keep the project on and ahead of schedule. Unfortunately, he had little tolerance for interference by Emiratis in project matters. He always said, that is why they hired him!

Anyhow, in an evening of bad decision making, bad choices, Theuns tried to embarrass the Emiratis; and he paid the price. Off the job, in prison, out of the country forever.

His replacement as Sponsor was of the worst sort--a young bean counter, recent graduate from Australia on her first assignment in the Middle East. Fortunately, by the time she finished all the interviews, psych profiling and in-processing--by the time she arrived on the job, all of the my work was in place, the landscape team was well in motion on its own momentum. The team of can do people was already working like a smooth, well oiled unit.

The new Sponsor did her record keeping like a champ, despite my not attending any of her weekly meetings. A shame she did not leave the office; must have been because of the school lesson on delegation. Good thing was I never had to confront or step on her--maybe she did have some smarts. In any case, I was supported by senior people across all disciplines who knew the problems of the landscape work being the last to get done and the need to cajole all associated and preceding works. Some work just has to be coordinated and done in the field in order to get done well and on time in these fast moving tight deadline complex jobs.

In time she will learn that, too.

13.8: Marwan Abourachid and Thomas George

These were two key people from the landscape contractor. Marwan unfortunately never changed. From the beginning he was a stubborn cuss who masqueraded as a gentleman. After three weeks of him saying yes to me without producing improvements--no substantial cooperation--I had to take action.

I met with his Managing Director, who wanted the work, who wanted the prestige of this Empty Quarter five star resort destination. I explained to him what we had done in the plant list modification for drought, wind and sun tolerance, at no cost to the owner. I explained the new material for an opening day upgrade that would be a change order add. He understood and was on board.

I explained the reasons for re-organizing the plants at Thomas George's nursery which he also found sensible.

Then lastly, I came to the issue of his Project Manager, Marwan Abourachid and his inexcusable tardiness, his lack of logistic preparation and project process organization. I needed can do people in key positions. The Managing Director suggested that Marwan be reassigned to another project just getting underway. He also suggested to bring three new people to our Liwa Qsar project: 1) a new project manager; 2) a consultant botanist/horticulturist; and, 3) a project logistics/horticulture field specialist.

This all happened within ten days of our meeting. The landscape contractor team worked smoothly after these changes. Thomas George and his people were superb. All plants coming to site had been properly prepared, pruned, hardened off, beautiful in both form and health. Made opening day a charm!

As the train took Chalmers closer to his stop, his thoughts turned to Madge. He was returning after eight months on his own. Eight months of Chalmers, that is eight months without Erik. Eight months taking care of his own meals, his own shopping, his own laundry--it was the little stuff that informed his daily life culture. Now he was returning to his shared spaces, his shared life. He missed Madge; but, he was uncertain about his return.

Chalmers was not able to hide his week in the hospital from Madge. He was supposed to have gone to Singapore for silk; but instead, Madge's worst fear came true. He was injured and hospitalized after an automobile accident. She suffered to hear about it from distance. Sorry didn't cover it--from either side.

He thought, it won't be long now.

He transferred from the train to the funicular. It was late in the afternoon and the sky was overcast. This time of year there was little difference between the valley village and the small plateau up above where he and Madge lived. Fall plants were already naked of leaves. The first big snow could come any day. The temperature 5°C or below.

As the funicular rose, Chalmers recalled his excitement nearly nine months ago when he was asked to help fix the first five star resort destination deep in the Empty Quarter. It had been about the challenge. It had been about his joy in providing beautiful gardens for people.

Now the job was complete. The gardens were a success. The owner was satisfied, happy. That world was finished. Now he was home.

He was worried. Had he traded off something of emotion and trust, something he had held closely with Madge, just to build a couple gardens?

EPISODE 14: WANDERWEG

Erik exited the funicular. He calculated about half an hour walk to go. Outside the funicular terminus station as he turned the corner, he stood face to face with Madge.

He dropped his suitcases and hugged her long and hard. The smell of her hair intoxicated him as though he had never left. The warmth of their bodies connected--neither talked.

Then a cold breeze bristled Erik's face. It woke him up. He and Madge stepped back from each other. Madge said, "I brought the Croozer⁴⁰ and bike to help with your cases."

Erik placed them into the Croozer and before they started, he tenderly took her arm and embraced her again. "You, are my medicine," he said, holding her with his heart.

She whispered in his ear, "You're looking good."

Together, along the wanderweg, they walked the bike and Croozer. They walked the first ten or fifteen minutes in measured pace, in silence. The deciduous trees and shrubs had lost all their leaves. The forest was featureless, a lifeless russet, cold and gray.

Finally, Madge asked, "Well?"

"I'm ok, how 'bout you?"

"Nothing that time won't heal. Time and...Erik..." Tears began to flow. Madge stopped walking and started sobbing.

She looked at Erik and said, "I don't ever want this to happen again...but I know how much this kind of work has always meant to you..."

Erik was speechless...breathless...hurting all over.

While he was in Abu Dhabi, he had tried to talk her into a visit. She wanted no part. She liked the shopping there, but she would not give in. He knew if she

⁴⁰ A Croozer is a two wheeled trailer for attaching to a bicycle. It is for carrying items too heavy or too large for a *pannier*.

came to visit, he would not be able to make much quality time for her. Their written communications had remained cordial. She was under stress. He was under stress. Both of them toughed it out. Their iChats subtended that.

Now, today he could see and feel her open wounds. They shared a heart felt pain, a pain he had hidden from, until now. They started walking again, slowly. They spoke not a word...not another word until they arrived twenty minutes later at their home.

As they walked in, Madge asked, "Hungry?"

"No kidding!"

"I've got dinner started in the kitchen."

"Let me take a shower and then eat, ok?"

Before going to the shower, Erik quietly took out his package of embroidered Omani cloth. He had already wrapped it. Now he placed it on her work table, next to her sewing machine, where Madge would find it in her own time. The tag on it read: With love to my loving wife!

APPENDIX 1: SWISS MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE IMAGES

The following thirteen images describe the landscape character of the central Swiss mountains, documenting the presence of healthy moisture, rich pasture land, productive farm land, the character of a plentiful landscape. It is the landscape upon which Erik Chalmers turned his back for one more landscape adventure.

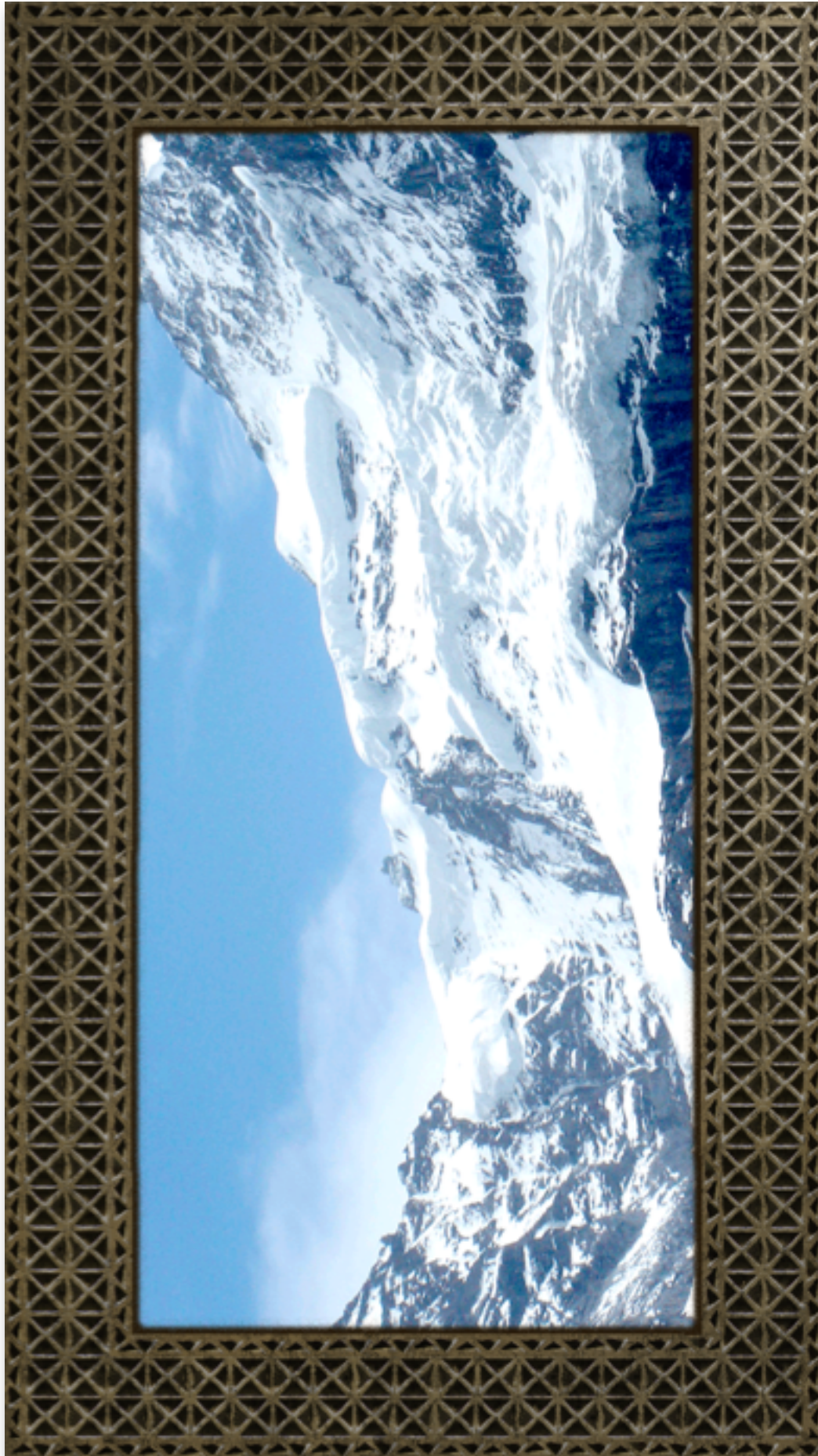


Image 1

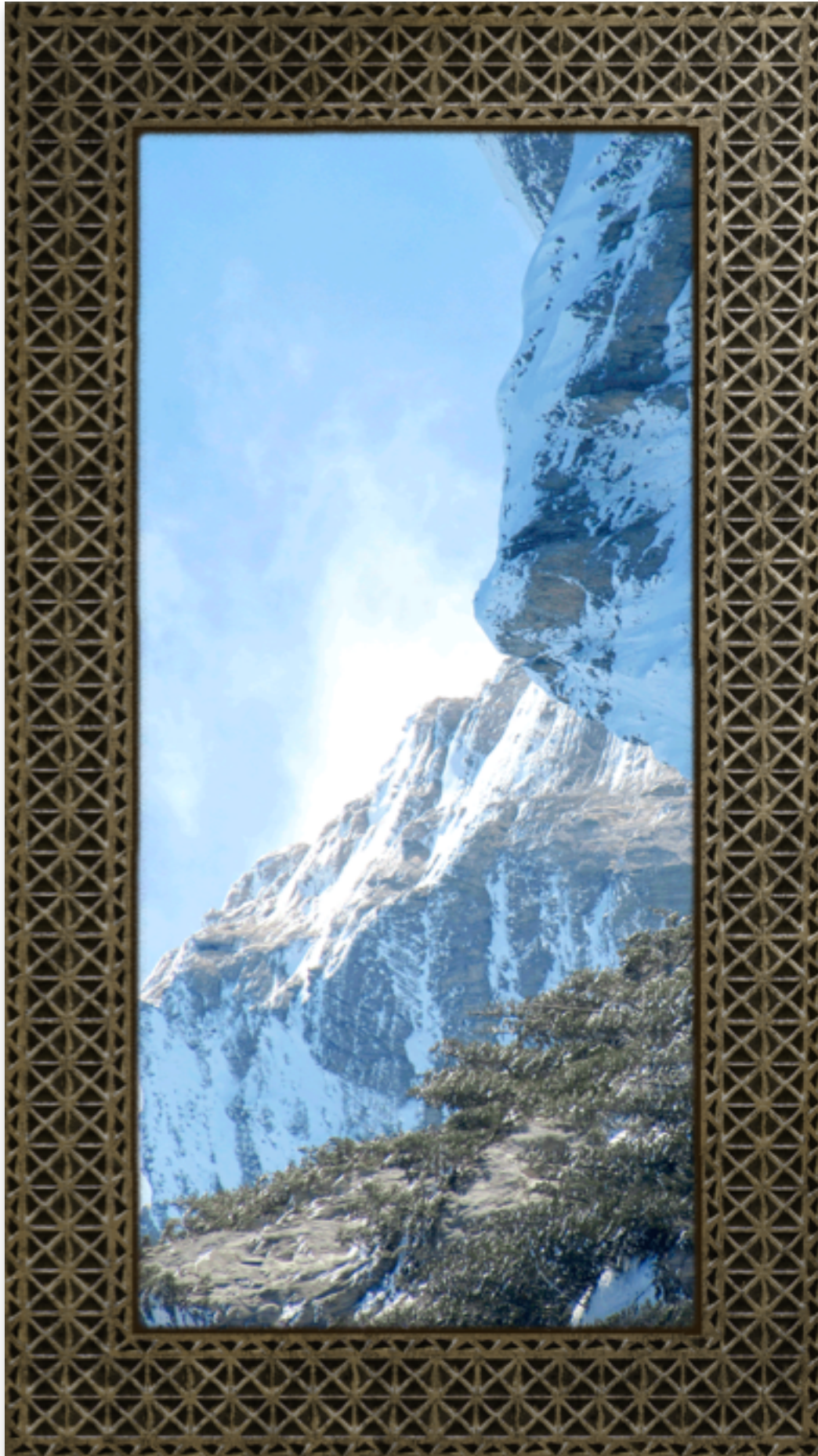


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

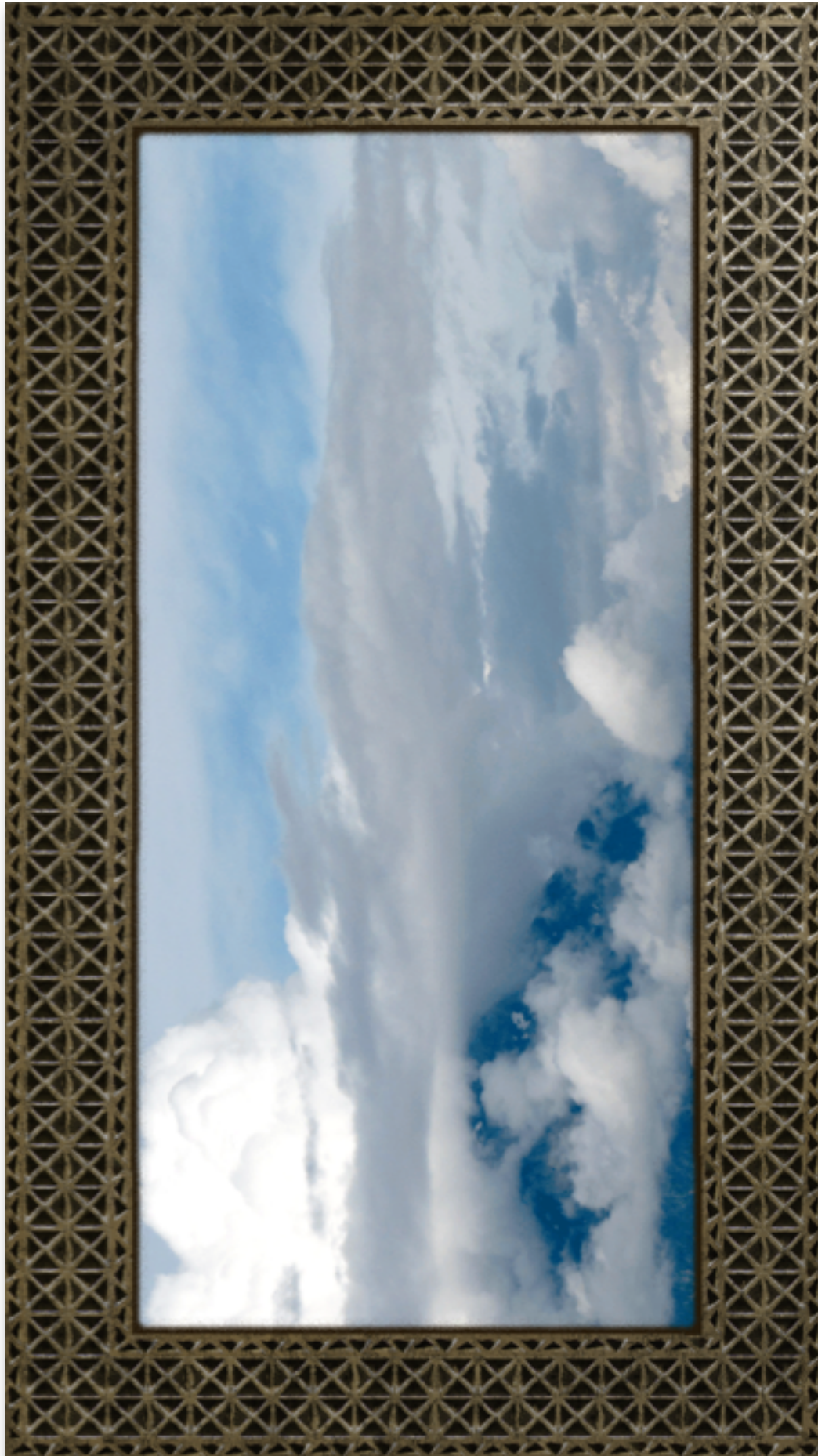


Image 5

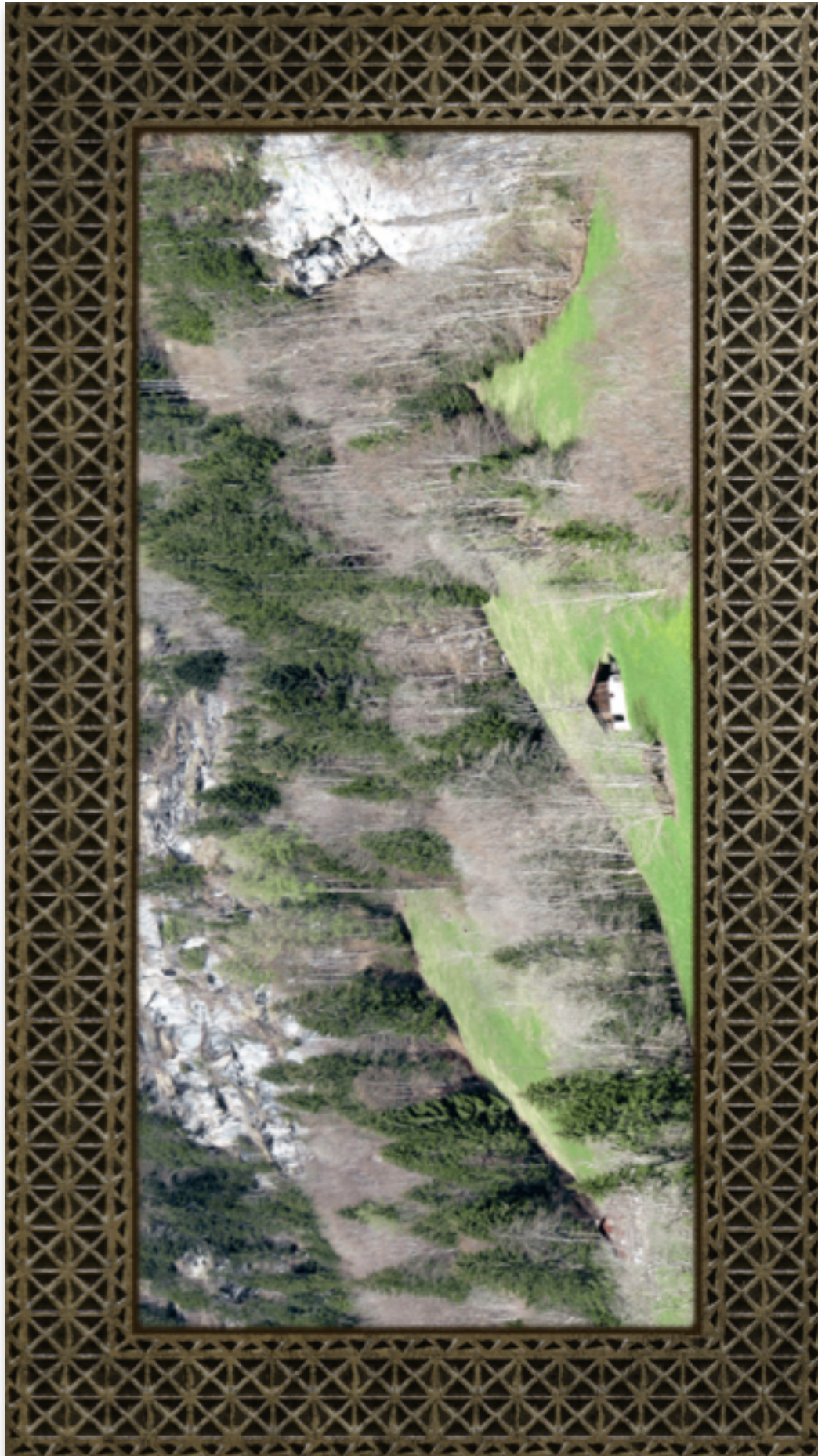


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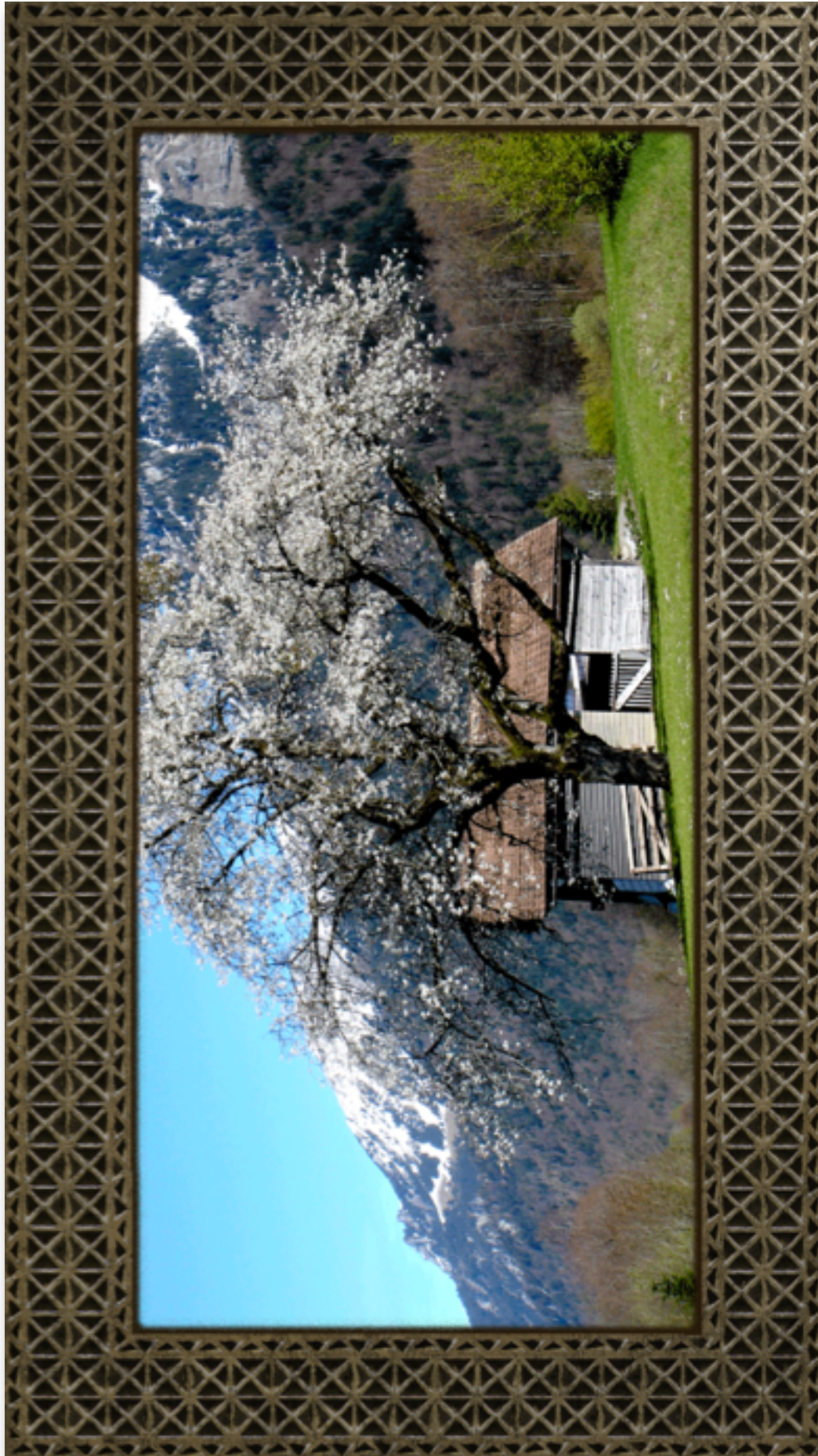


Image 7

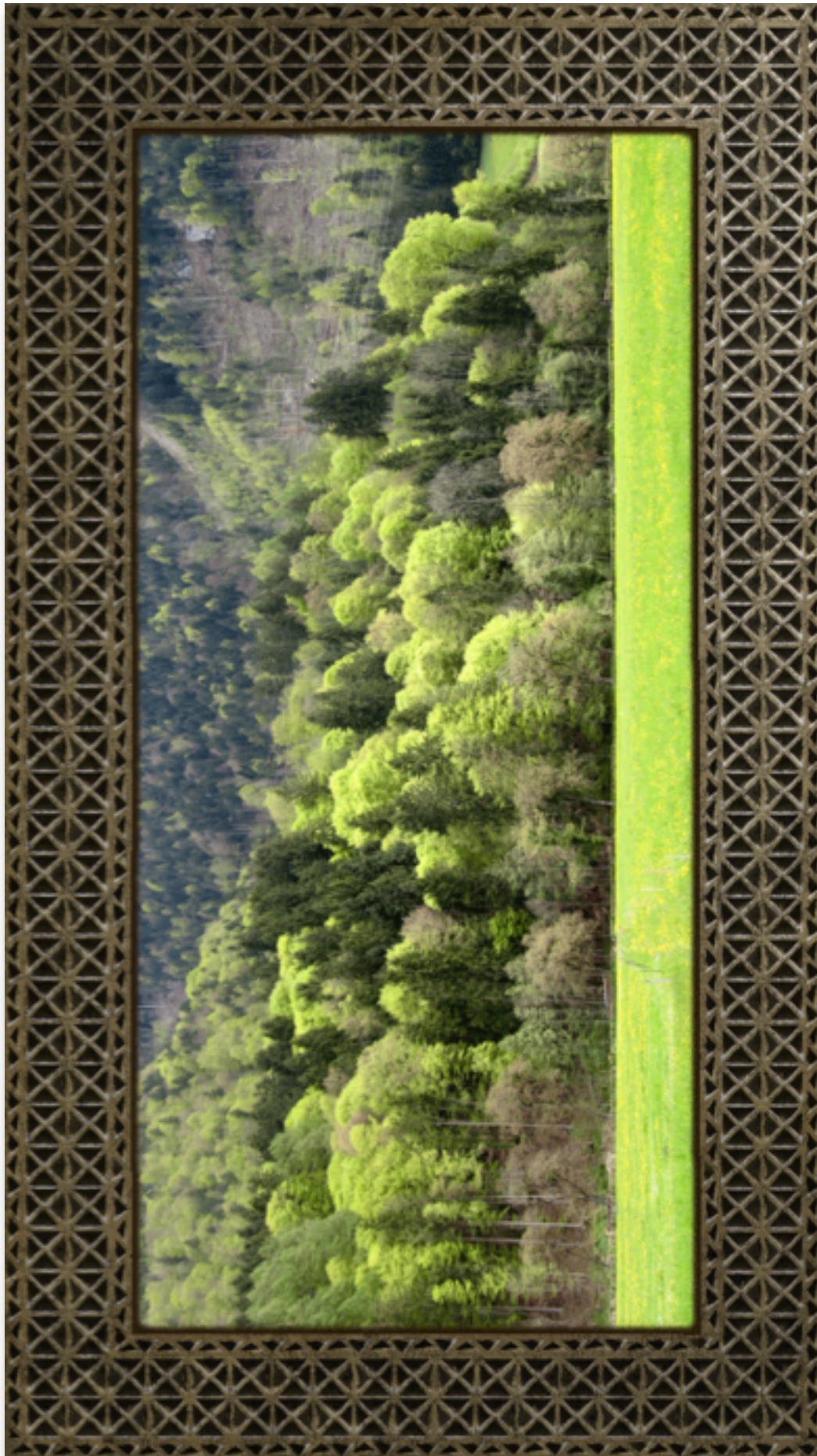


Image 8

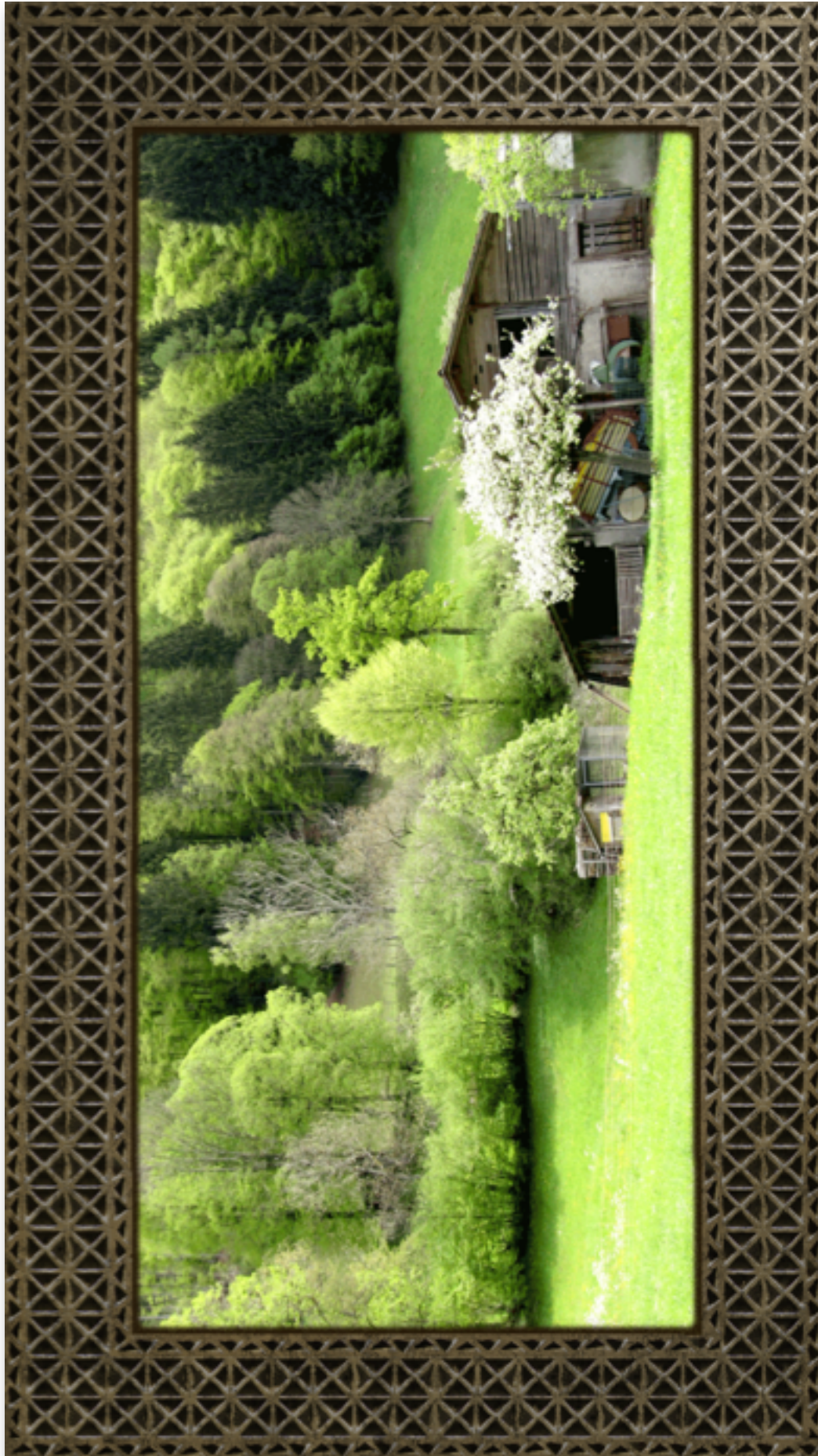


Image 9

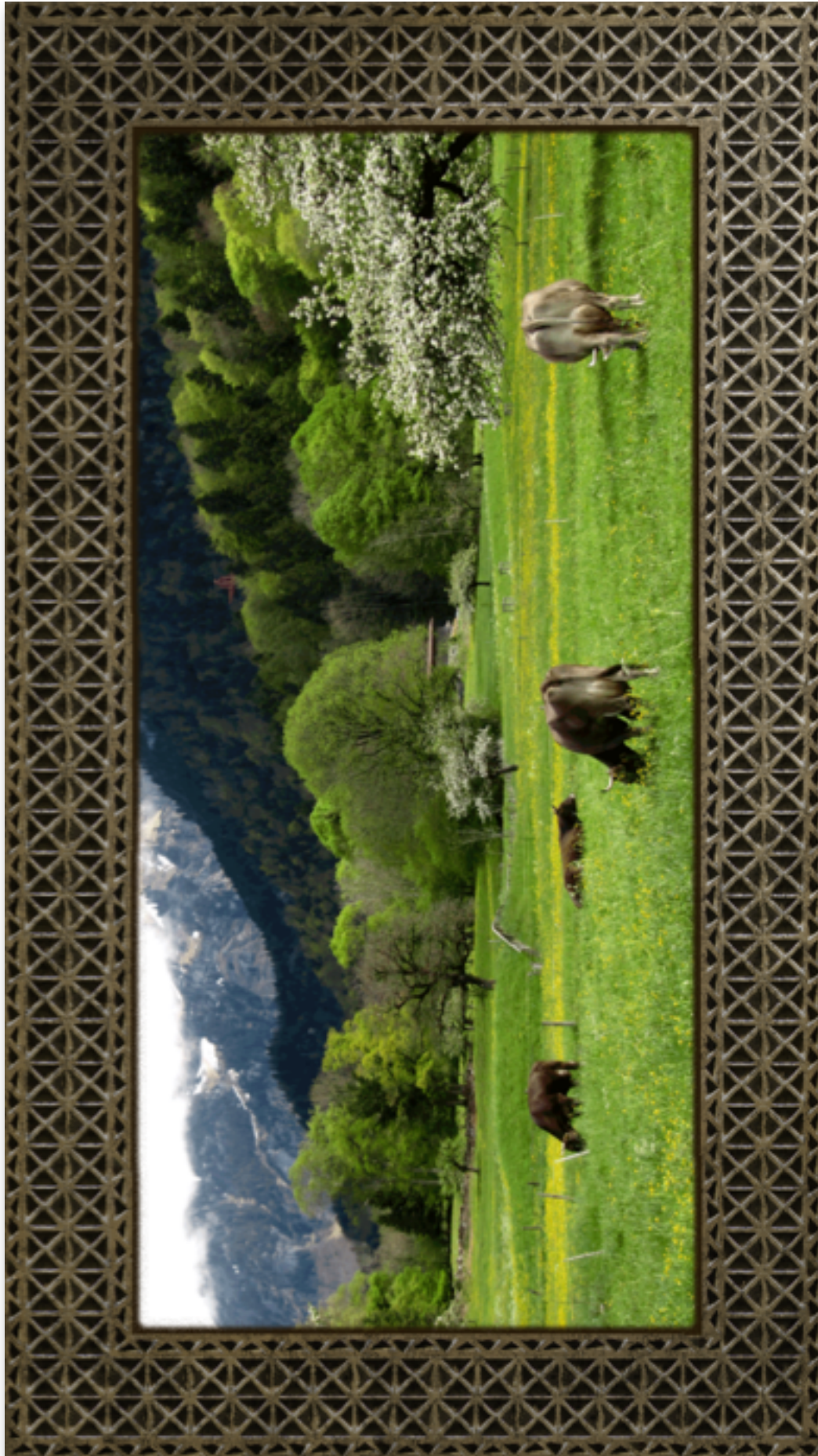


Image 10



Image 11

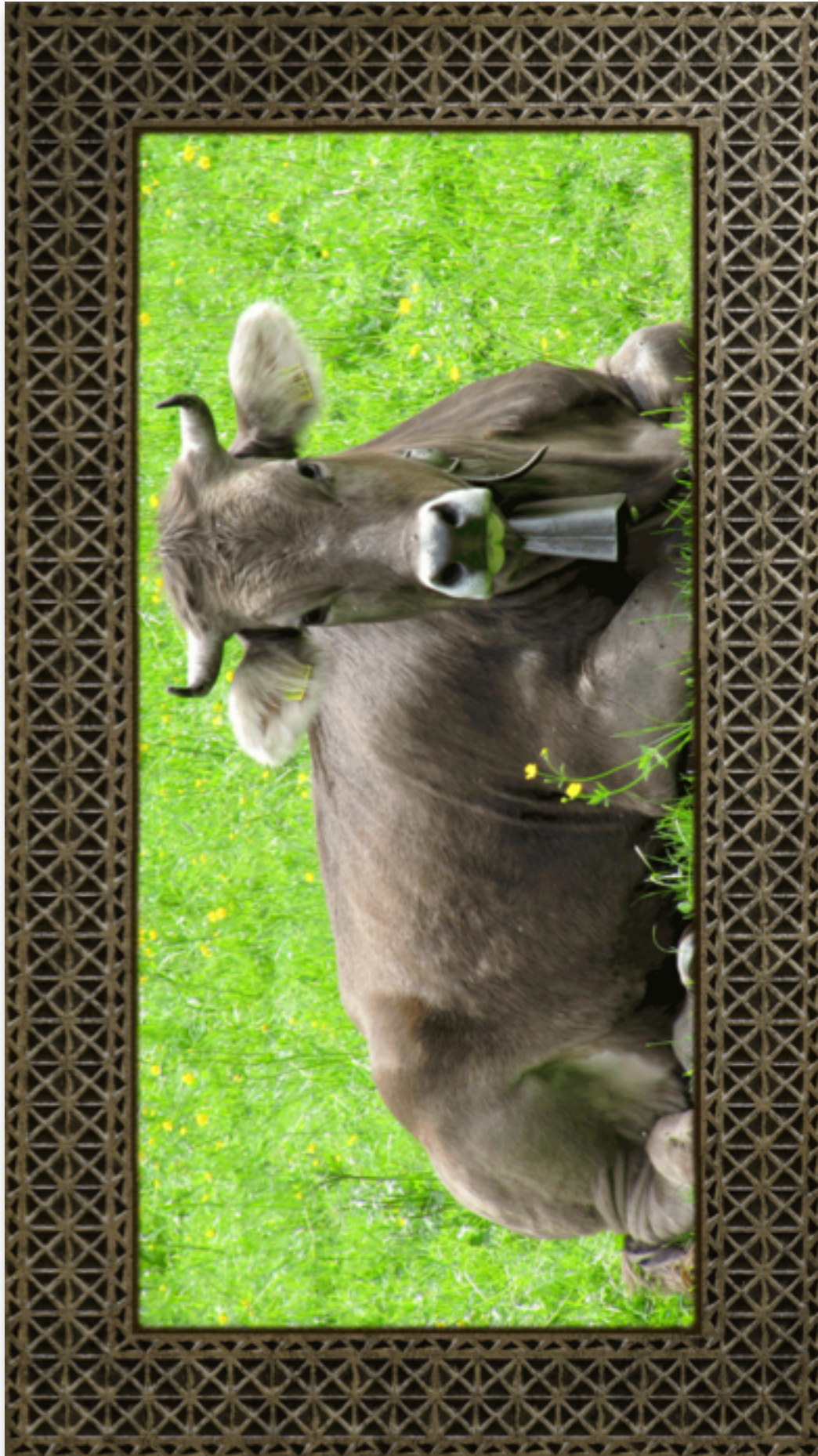


Image 12



Image 13

APPENDIX 2: EMIRATES DESERT LANDSCAPE IMAGES

The following thirteen images describe the landscape character of the Emirates desert, the Rub Al Khali, the Empty Quarter, the landscape of paucity, the landscape of Erik Chalmers' adventure.



Image 1

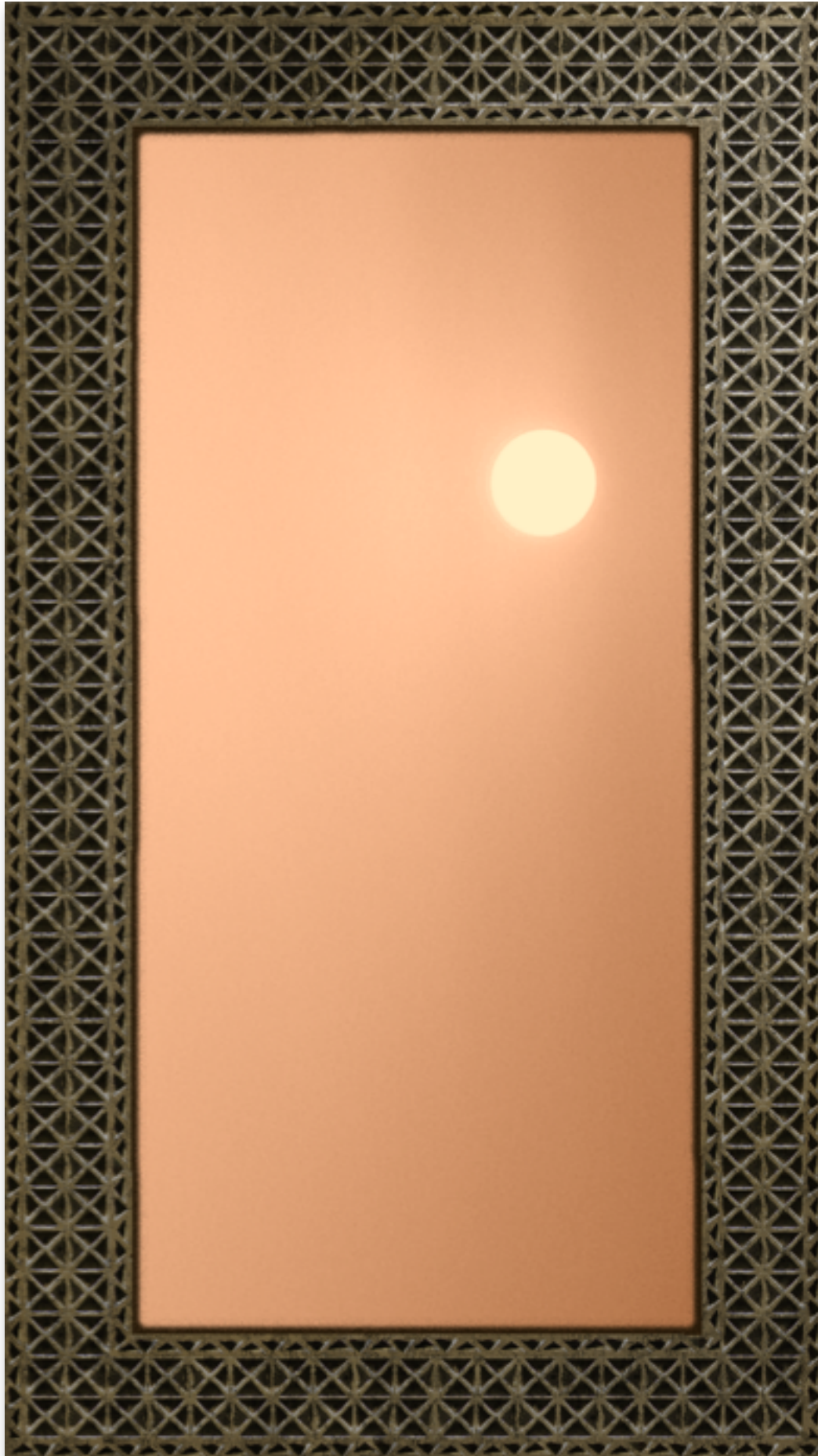


Image 2



Image 3

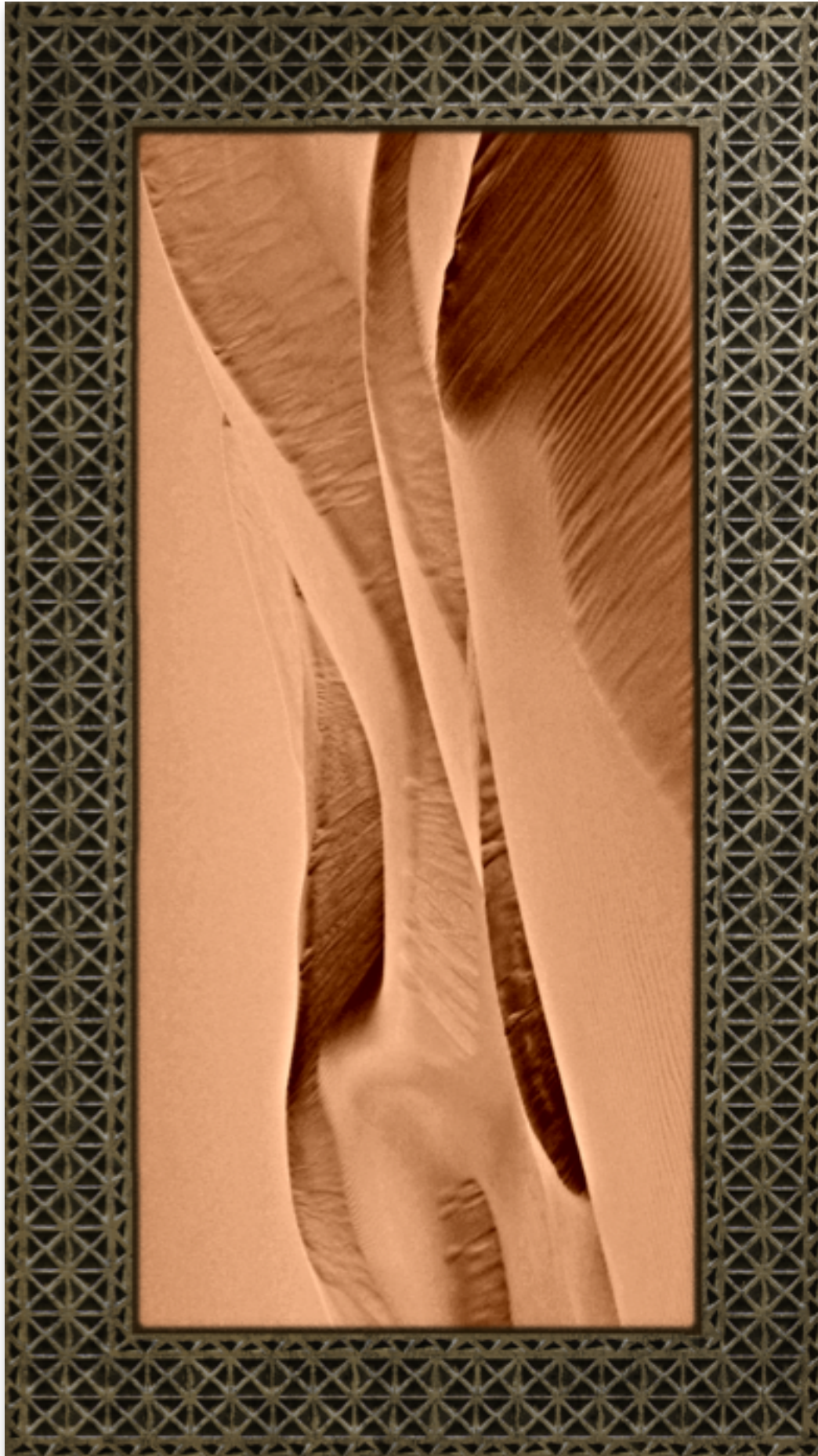


Image 4

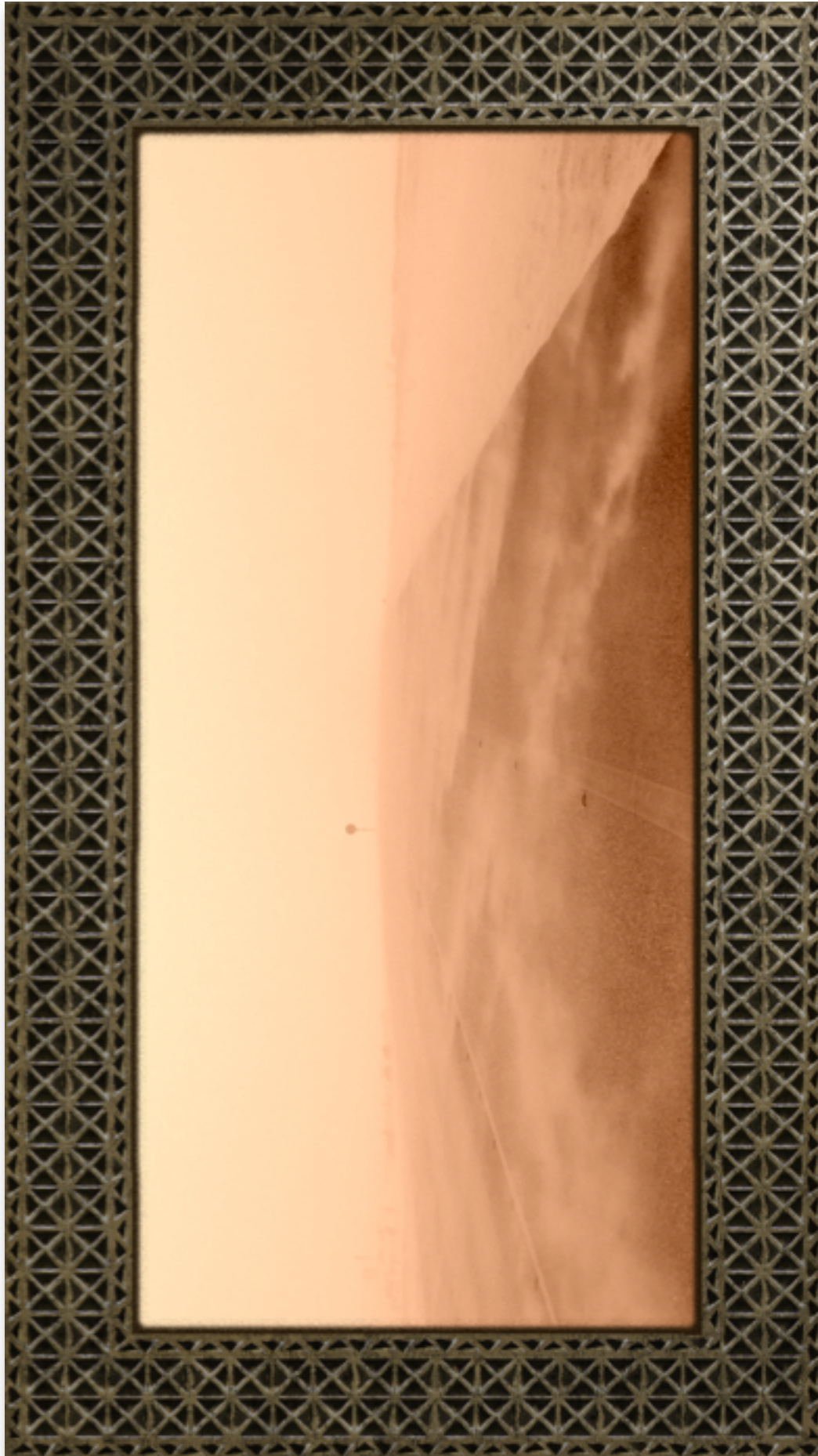


Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10



Image 11



Image 12



Image 13

APPENDIX 3: CHALMERS' MAPS OF ARABIA

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- Map 19: **Explorers, Sir Wilfred Thesiger, 1945-50**
- Map 20: **UAE History, the desert**
- Map 21: **UAE History, Pirate Coast, prior to 1820**
- Map 22: **UAE History, Trucial States, 1820**
- Map 23: **UAE History, since 1971**
- Map 24: **Transect, the beginning**



Map 1: Arabia Felix, Rub Al Khali



Map 2: Arabia Felix, Other Deserts



Map 3: Southwest Asia, History



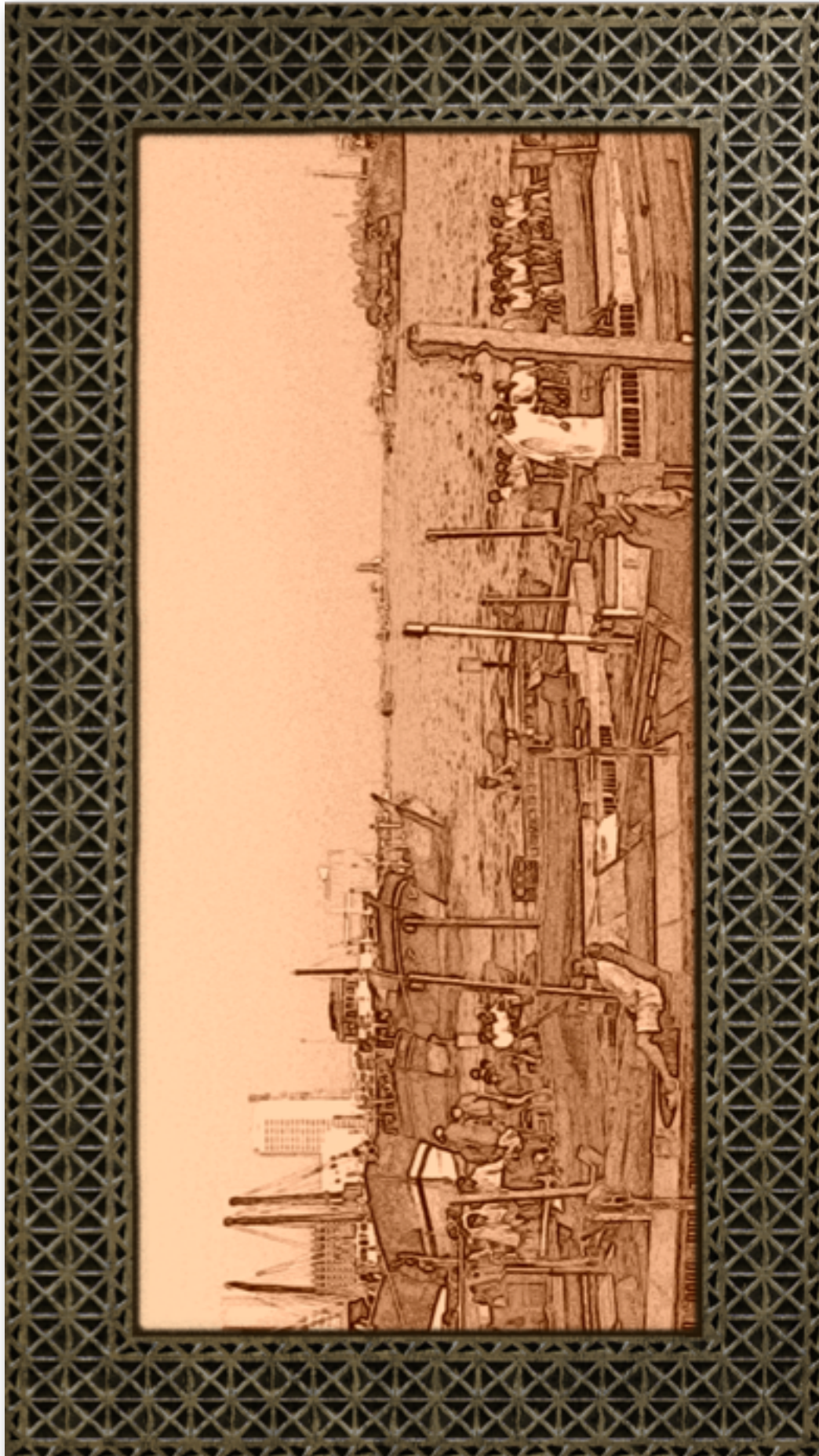
Map 4: Southwest Asia, Strait of Hormuz







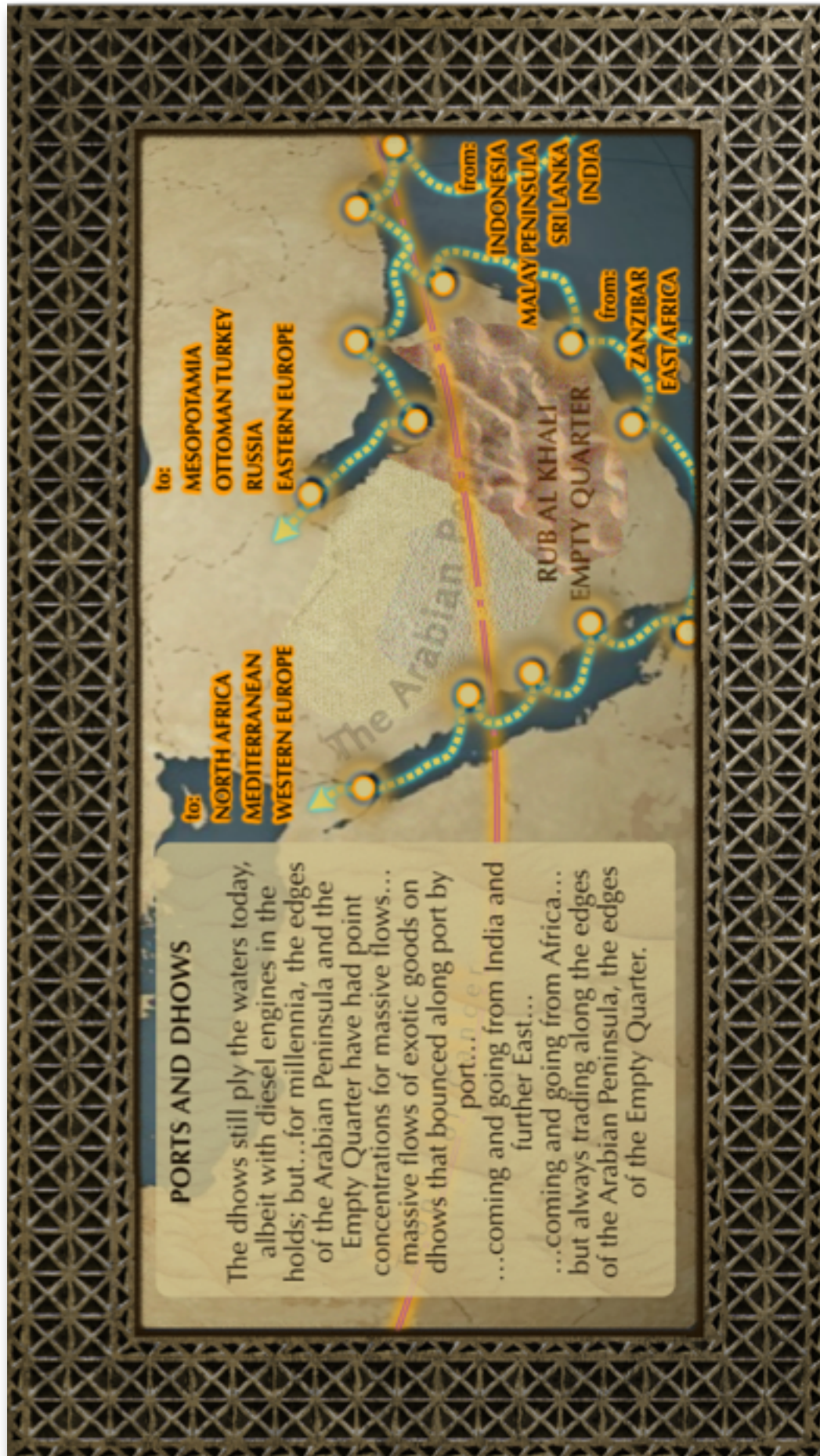
Map 7: Spice Routes, Dhow



Map 8: Spice Routes, Dhow



Map 9: Spice Routes, Dhow



Map 10: Spice Routes, Ports



Map 11: Spice Routes, Exotica



Map 12: Explorers, Mystique



Map 13: Explorers, 1400 Hegira Years



Map 14: Explorers, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, 1810



Map 15: Explorers, Sir Richard Francis Burton, 1852



Map 16: Explorers, Thomas Edward Lawrence, 1917



HARRY ST JOHN PHILBY
1920

"...waxing wanton with his
horses and eunuchs and
concubines...
...in an earthly paradise,
...until the wrath
came upon him
and reduced the scene
of his riotous pleasures
to ashes and desolation..."

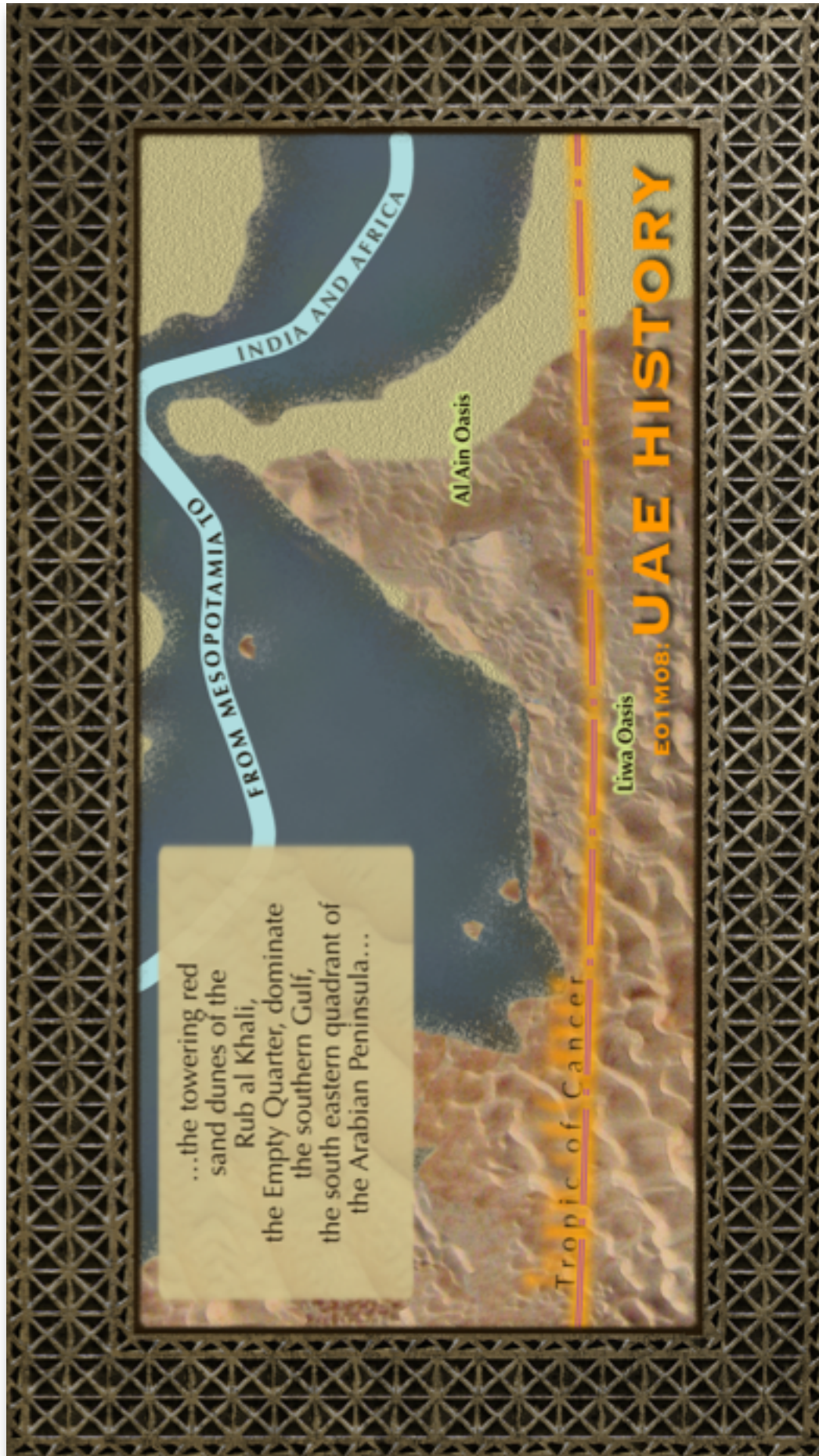
Map 17: Explorers, Harry St John Philby, 1920



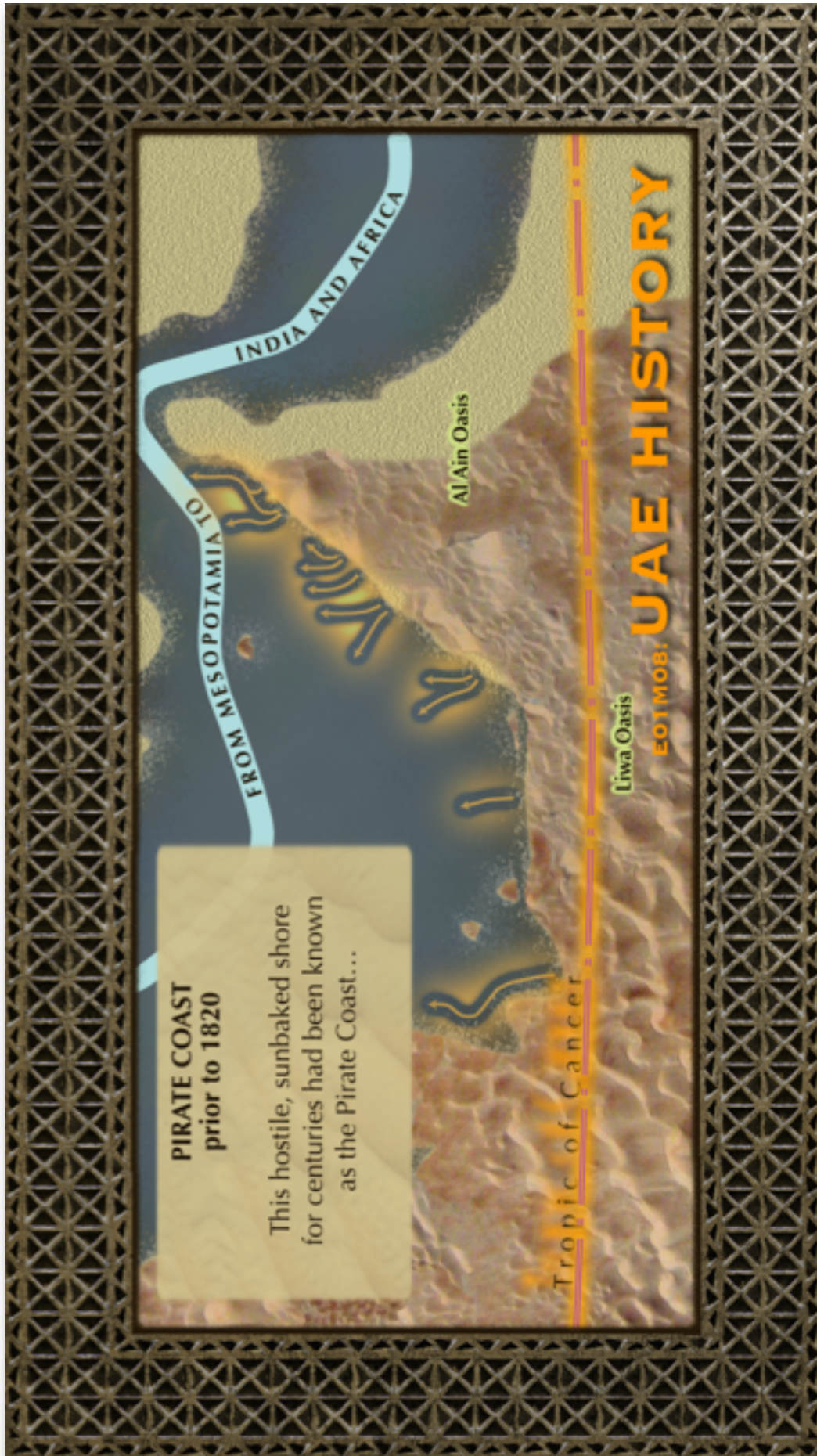
Map 18: Explorers, Bertram Thomas, 1931



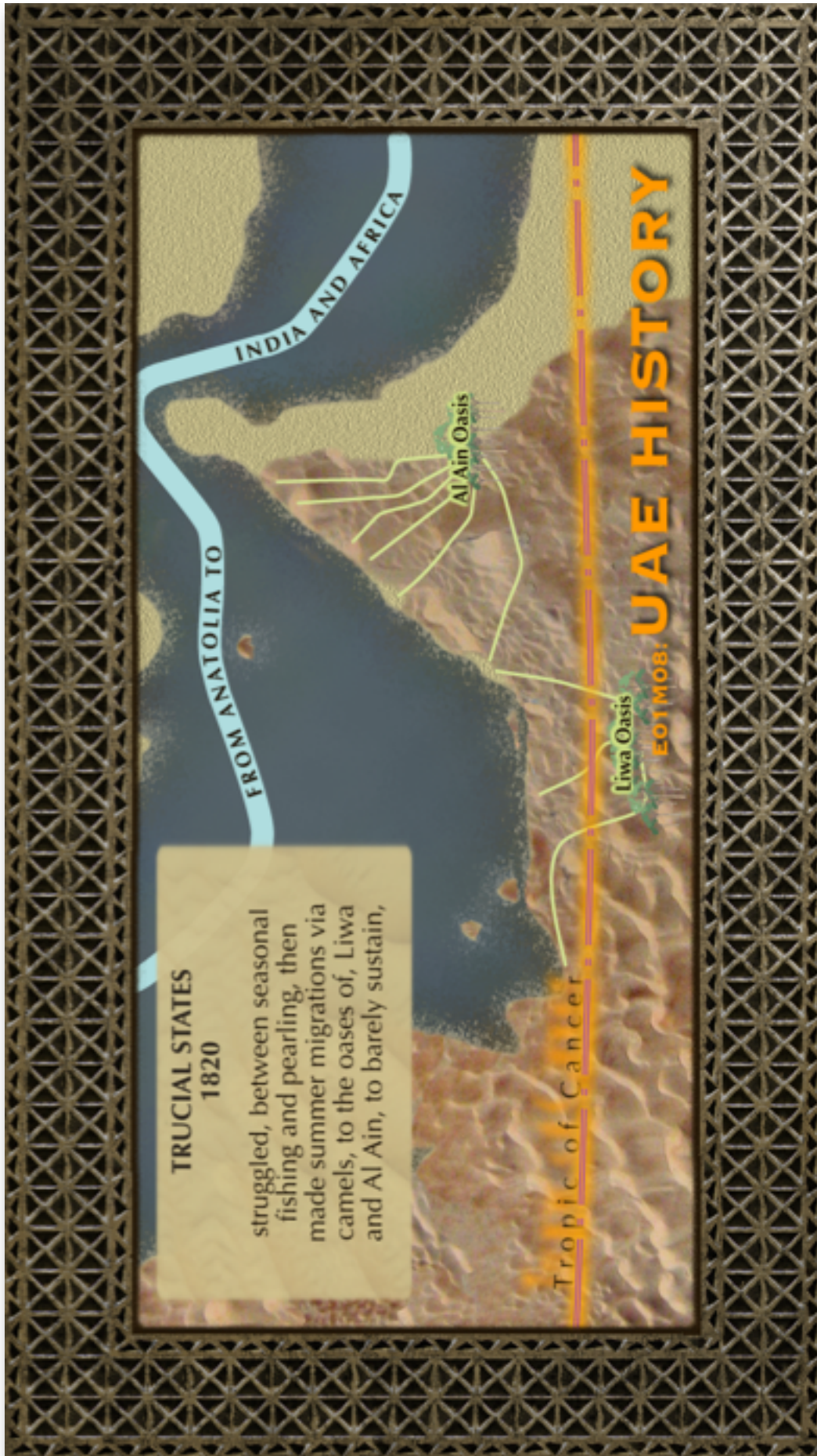
Map 19: Explorers, Sir Wilfred Thesiger, 1945-50



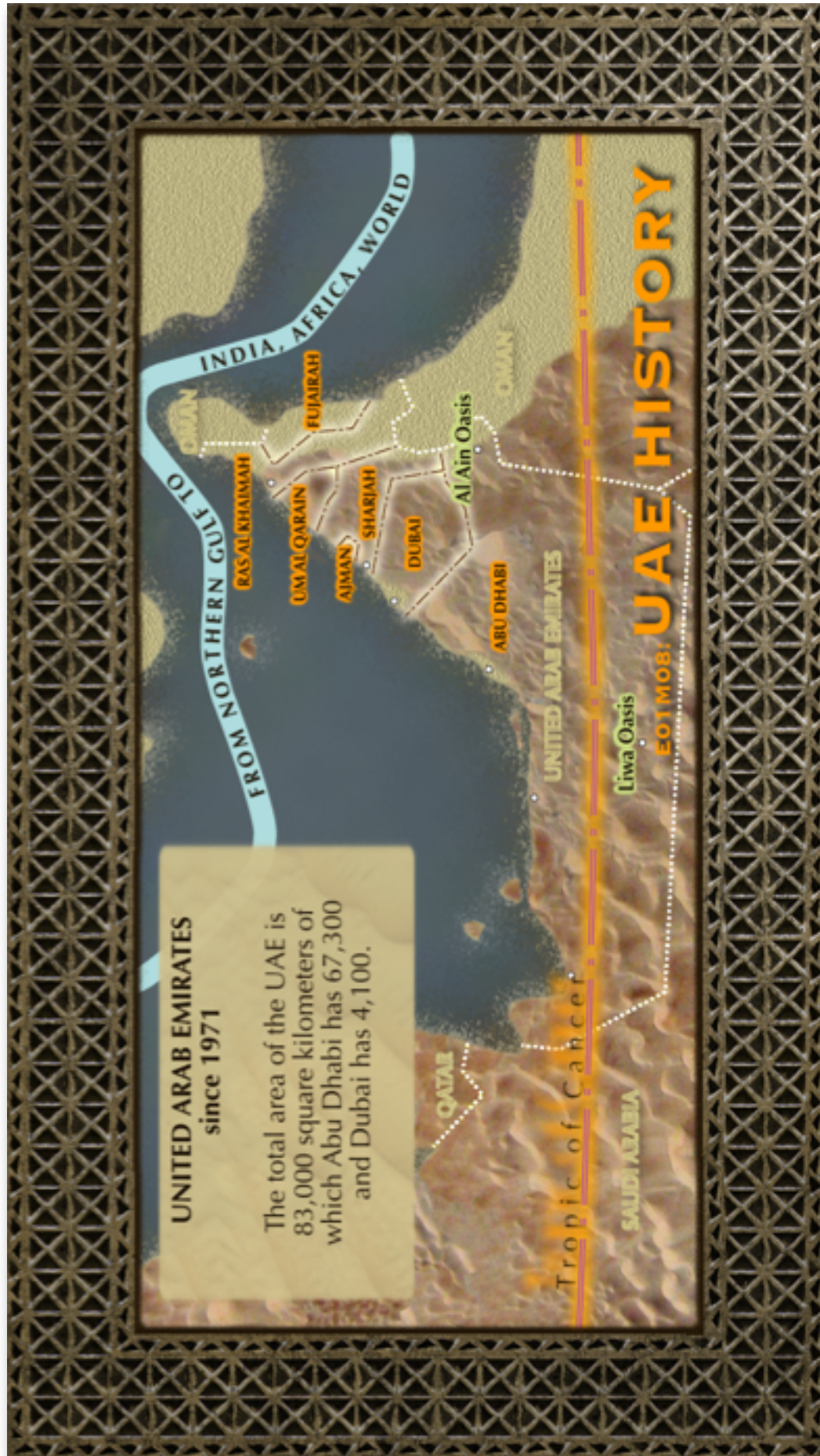
Map 20: UAE History, the desert



Map 21: UAE History, Pirate Coast prior to 1820



Map 22: UAE History, Trucial States 1820



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
since 1971

The total area of the UAE is 83,000 square kilometers of which Abu Dhabi has 67,300 and Dubai has 4,100.

UAE HISTORY

Map 23: UAE History, since 1971



Map 24: Transect, the beginning

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Peculiarities

Readers will kindly note that in addition to Swiss German and Arabic words in the text, the English used in this story is an unpredictable mashup of English language varieties including:

- American Midwest,
- English Home Counties,
- Old British Commonwealth,
- International English, and the geographically unique varieties of,
- Pidgin English, from the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian sub-Continent and South East Asia

Because of the above mashups in the text, there will be linguistic ambiguities in the reading. These reflect the daily life experience in the geography of the story, the ambiguous, uncertain and confusing realities of expatriate life.

The ellipses, ..., have been used variously in the text as extended pauses, trailing off endings, or a time of thinking. Rarely the ellipses indicate that words have been left out. Context will make that clear.

More often the ellipses take the place of words not being said or sometimes the speaker is momentarily at a loss for words and lastly sometimes in narration, descriptive words do not complete the aura, the character of the situation or setting...there is more depth than can be described...the ellipses then leave it to the readers' imagination.

In this landscape story I expanded landscape beyond a dramatic stage set, beyond a travel documentary. Landscape became enhanced on multiple levels:

- As a character itself,
- As a major impact on plot, and
- As the primary experience of the story.

I hope this landscape story extends reader's perception of the human interactive qualities of landscape, of gardens, of plants.

In this pdf format there are internal links from the Table of Contents to each Episode and Part. There are also internal links from the List of Maps to each map and back again to the list.

Kelvin Isley was distantly related to a certain respectable George Isley whose expatriate landscape exploits are related in minute detail via records kept by Algernon Blackwood, in a volume entitled, *A Descent into Egypt*.

More of the Edward Flaherty's landscape story efforts can be found online at:
<http://flahertylandscape.wordpress.com/>