

# ONE

---

## *Sahara 1936*

The boy's laughter echoed strangely from the craggy outcrops of distorted rock above the dry wadi. The December afternoon heat had grown from a dawn frost that for brief minutes before sunrise had given the desert sand a frail crust, strong enough to support the daintier mammals who scavenged its inhospitable surface. Now it was dry, seemingly almost liquid, and the vibrations of the child's voice in the still, hot air produced minuscule avalanches where the sand lay steeply wind-blown beneath the ochre cliffs.

Once, twenty thousand years before, the wadi had contained a river, its shallows reed-filled, its banks overhung by great trees. On lush, rolling hills vast herds of game had wandered and fed, returning at dusk to the refreshing waters which had flowed through the fertile land.

Over the long ages the water-table had dropped, and the river which had tumbled between rich banks now seeped uselessly and hidden a hundred feet beneath the scorched plain. Each day the relentless Sahara sun drew a little of the dying river's moisture towards the harsh surface, and in rare places where soluble minerals met, combined, and crystallized, there formed the desert roses; delicate, exotically beautiful. The boy was searching for them.