

*Alien Animus*

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### **Tellurium, c 20,000 BP**

The last rays of the blood red sun threw its mournful rays over the doomed city. From the heights of the temple of Polaris Merduk standing next to Zohex observed the red tinted jumble of the houses, their windows afire, glowing as the sun sank over the jagged mountains towards the west. The fading light reflected off the profusion of domed public buildings, off inlaid turquoise stone and lapis lazuli's radiating like dazzling jewels a vision of glittering architectural splendour.

Tellurium arisen by the power of Zohex's coming now tottering on the brink of destruction. Zohex sent by the Deep Visionaries of distant Prima to contain on Earth the discordant mental resonance of this homicidal race from infecting Prima's universe. Containing this murderous race from developing technically as had their kin on Regum. Pacified at last. Curtailing their instinctual animalistic predilection to engage in endless wars. A feat easily accomplished by Zohex who had united the warring tribes into a unitary society now dominant on the continent.

Under threat from a dark encroaching race making their way from a land to the east beyond the ocean, intent on conquest. Lured by Tellurium's fabled wealth. Wending their way inexorably towards the stricken city.

Merduk's presence supposedly to guide Zohex's vision to be master of not just this continent but of Earth. Undisputedly so. Now threatened by an invasion of an occultly driven army intent to impose their dark dreams as they had done in their distant lands. Tellurium the final conquest. Something Zohex seemed indifferent to. Merduk

puzzled by this. Zohex accepting Merduk with supine hauteur. Of no consequence which Merduk was only too painfully aware of. Zohex determined. At his apogee which was to be short-lived. Reasoning with him was hopeless. For Zohex was created. Originally a simulacrum crafted by the combined willpower of the Deep Visionaries stationed at the orbital over Prima to do Prima's will. Contain Earth. Shut down their alien excrescence which was poisoning their holy space. Threatening their unitary god by warping space with their twisted murderous exultant urge to dominate space itself. Instigating through psychic manipulation to control Prima's rightful destiny. Corrupt their race as they had corrupted themselves. Then strike across the immensity of space and bring down Prima.

The invading occult army now intent to vanquish Tellurium itself.

As they stood on the massive protective walls of the ziggurat Merduk could not help but puzzle whether Zohex had been contaminated by the evil warlords who had landed north of the city without meeting any resistance. It occurred to Merduk as he surveyed the landscape, the buildings sprawling along the coastal plain if Zohex was not himself infected by the deadly dark demented dreams of the coming invaders.

Below the populace was astir. The soldiers at their posts. Cautiously alert for Zohex had given no orders to meet the encroaching invaders. Their assumption Zohex was leading them onward for reasons as yet unexplained. Spies would be numerous. But below, in the courtyard, the streets, in front of the many temples people were uncomfortable at the inaction of the protectors whom they expected to mount some sort of defence.

Standing on the lofty parapet of the towering ziggurat, this sacred fane of the people and the now vanished priests who had withdrawn into their cells to pray for their unitary god's intervention. The murmur of the assembled below rising with nervous

apprehension. For beyond the walls, towards the northern escarpment hundreds of lights were descending through the passes. Now seen by all, the agitation of the people were buzzing like angry wasps driven to a barely contained frenzied anger at Zohex's inaction.

Zohex had discarded his priestly garb, indicating his office was now as the supreme ruler, clad in animal skins. The fading rays of the sun reflected upon his ornamental embellishments. Sparks of light shot off his bejewelled presence. A soldier brought his charger but Zohex waved him away. The animal left a dollop. It occurred to Merduk at this fateful moment that Zohex intended this dark occult race to be here. Wondering if this ancient race would succumb in violent anticipation to conquer, with Zohex's blessings this fabled land.

Worse. Merduk, with no need for mystical jewels or enchanting crystals to charge his persona, wearing a simple grey tunic feared the worse. That Zohex had willed Tellurium's submission. Unlike the puzzled populace who were starting to leave in droves, setting their houses on fire and leave nothing to the enemy.

The sun sank behind the mountains as the lights carried by the invaders spread across the coastal plain. Ships were leaving the crowded harbours seeking safety in distant lands. Night spread a blanket of furtive gloom over what would soon be a cadaverous city.

With the enemy at the open gates an awful silence descended upon those gathered below. Zohex began his threatening incantations which seemed rather late in the day. His tremulous voice resounded over the city. The black clad soldiers were pouring into the city feeling themselves to be rightful conquerors. Dancing flickering flames from innumerable torches surged around the temple in a tempestuous ocean whipping their psychic occultly driven powers into a brutal explosion of paramount hate. Watched

keenly by Zohex who Merduk noticed was not concerned with what was happening below. Zohex was focussed on the northern mountains. Maybe his army was moving in from behind to trap the usurpers in the city. Other houses were now on fire with no one assisting to contain the coming conflagration. The priest's desperate prayers barely audible. Trying to weave ineffective spells of protection over their domain.

The fires continued to spread with frightening speed. Watched with supine indifference by Zohex continuing to stare into the distance. Further afield the terraced gardens near the hills of the suburbs were overrun by crazed zealots whipped into a torrent of frenzied destruction. The buildings blackened by lustful fires denying the invaders their booty.

Zohex ceased his sonorous incantations as the nighted hell below turned the population into a mindless mass of verifiable hysteria. Rising like the heat generated below of burnt wood, charred flesh as suffocating smoke shrouded the temples quivering on the brink of immanent destruction.

As the city burned Zohex tore his gaze away from the distant mountains seemingly satisfied which left Merduk perplexed. Unless it had been Prima's aim all along not to align the people here towards accepting their belief in the unitary god but to annihilate them for the threat they would pose in the future. Zohex gave Merduk an indifferent look turning on his heel and making his way into the refuge of the temple. Merduk followed as he had done since his insertion, his arrival to keep an eye on the simulacrum which had morphed into a persona. Merduk still considered Zohex to be a creature, a creation of the Deep Visionaries. His brief to shadow this inserted phenomena wondering why he was not being retrieved by the Reganians who had given the Primaians the technology to make the insertions possible.

They descended the narrow stairs into the inner sanctum of fine grey marble polished to a high finish. Soft hued comforting lights were suspended by gilded chained lamps, ornamentally cast lights illuminating the interior of the sacred fane. Now deserted by the priests who had withdrawn into their cells. Down more stairs into the bowels of the earth. A small chamber. No indications that it had any use. Totally bare.

Outside sonorous intonations of the invasive contagion turning the fear stricken people into a mindless mass of excruciating hysteria.

A rumble issued from the bowels of the earth. Volcanos erupted all around the city sending streaming lines of liquid fire into the sky before falling in horrid splendour onto the trapped on the ground. Not distinguishing between fiend and friend as hundreds were turned into macabre living torches staggering to their horrific death. The sonorous rumble continued as the ocean floor collapsed. Volumous clouds of hissing steam arose from the turmoil of the disturbed waters as primal elements clashed sending a monumental tidal wave towards the stricken city.

Merduk saw it all through the mind of Zohex. As if this had been destined. Willed into existence. Or known prior their insertion that Tellurium was doomed right from the beginning. Merduk aghast. Prima could blame the failure on their sister planet Regum. A ruse all along. The trap set and sprung. The key being Zohex's conversion of the multitude to leave their ancient gods behind and accept the unitary deity of Prima. With Tellurium wasted it would be all too easy to blame Regum's misuse of technology for its destruction. Brilliant in formulation, deadly in intent and final in execution.

As Zohex seemed to concentrate upon the floor Merduk was stumped at the audacity of the plan. The Reganians who had effected his transition had themselves been caught in Prima's devious deceit.

“You knew all along.” Merduk observing Zohex who continued to focus on the bare floor. Now was not the time for discourse Merduk realised. It would not be long until the floodwaters entered the holy precinct. The earth rumbled, quaking. The walls seemed to vibrate but not from the dissonant elements in conflict around them.

Recall.

Merduk and Zohex’s inserted continually collapsing probability waves were being retargeted. Hopefully withdrawn as outside buildings tottered then collapsed in an ominous rumble of fire, smoke and dust. The tidal wave continued landward with measured force. The relentless flood unstoppable. Boulders the size of temples fell with grim determination upon the burning devastated city. With a deafening roar discerned even down here the angry waters descended upon the ruins above. Tellurium remembered only in distant lore and vanished mythology.

They both sensed at first a shift in the continuum in which they were present. A pregnant infusion of vibrating energy. Activating the recall codes from their point of exit on Regum. Activating the sequence that would remove them from Earth. On the flat marbled floor two black squares. Faint glimmering lights like stars giving the black manifestation the appearance of infinite space. A cyber recreation of the universe at their feet. Merduk followed Zohex’s lead, barely paying attention to him as if it mattered not what Merduk intended to do.

Yet something was different once they had both stepped into the reverberating dark square. Zohex supremely self confident vanished. Then Merduk as the waters above crashed over the temple complex. The jump gates vanished. Extraction successful.



Zohex was reassured of the correctness of his cyber mind in not returning to Regum. Another far more potent energy field had subsumed the open gate of Regum's WebSpace. Reaching out from the future. Zohex did not bother to analyse this shift in emphasis. He was in a barely glowing lilac sphere with portals into time as well as space. To complete his mission, slowly glimmering in the back of his mind he would remain on Earth. He had lured the dark archimage's army, the best of his soldiers into a monumental trap wiping out his power. Beaten but not yet defeated. Once he had achieved that he would be master of this planet and it's alien spawn. For that is what Earthers were. Homicidal maniacs glorying in the madness that is war. If war is what they want then war is what they will be smothered in. It would curtail the quest for peaceful comprehension of the laws of the universe. Knowledge that might lead them to lean towards the scientific quest as pursued by Regum. So inimical to Prima's aims of aligning all sentient life towards their lodestone of bowing and acknowledging that the primary force in the universe was their unitary god. Everything else was not just false reasoning, it was a blasphemous heresy. Regum would in the end be isolated and dealt with accordingly. But first to finish of Earth's predilection to follow in the future of Regum's path. The quest for the infinite was to be spiritual, not material. Knowledge too dangerous for any species in uncovering let alone comprehending the laws of the universe. For then any reality, using quantum physics through the shaping of quantum probability waves could be made manifest as the final the ultimate reality. Tailored to the whim of the Reganians and not the Primaians. Earth had to be aligned to boost their combined psychic mental powers and crash the mind set of the Reganians.

Zohex insistent on success. He had the combined mental faculties of specific psychically configured Deep Visionaries boosting his own psychic capabilities. He had

fooled those on Tellurium. Now to establish his realm near the archimage who had lost his army. He could either join Zohex's quest or be annihilated in defying him. Nor would he focus purely his energies in one space time locale. He would move into the relative future to establish a psychic beachhead to make sure his will would be done.

Surrounded now by the quantum bubble, as he presumed was Merduk though he sensed nothing, he determined in that future to embed himself where there was least discord. An environment deficient in the turbulent energies accompanied by highly active psychic minds. From within this space embedded cyber sphere he found it easy to be in as many places he thought necessary to accomplish his goals. They might not be Prima's but neither would they be inimical to the planet that had created him as the essence he was. A simulacrum with intent. In that one future he had chosen he would make sure his enterprise would come to fruition, a process begun in the distant relative past.

To Zohex's delight he soon found Merduk. There was only one in the whole universe. Merduk had gravitated towards the very same locale Zohex had mapped out for himself to challenge this distant occult warlord. Prior re-emerging he scoured the limited abilities of this cyber-sphere he was in. He was learning fast. This manifestation was far in advance of Regum's WebSpace. In itself a minor construct compared to the potential he possessed here. Whether Merduk thought he had escaped Zohex seemed immaterial. Never manifest yourself without knowing what the other was doing. Time to begin the final subjugation of Earth.

He concentrated his mind, willed it to re-enphase the black star filled jump gate. The yawning gaps in the cyber sphere would self construct over time. For the moment it was a retreat. Soon it would be the centre of this universe. Having been immersed in the designed, shaped quantum probability wave, created by Regum's quantum computers it

was easy to recall the configuration necessary to traverse space and time and insert himself once more on Earth. Near the archimage. Then at the periphery of a desert continent where he could test his powers for the coming conflict he would create for another coming calamity that would drag the Earthers into violent conflict. And with a little help create a vortex of destruction that would derail their scientific and technological advances so inimical to Prima's vision. He looked forward to the challenge. One thing he was not going to do. Go back to those who had created the energy, channelled and focussed his essence. Whilst not quite free he knew he was independent. For back on Regum and also with Prima's DVs he would, from their view have vanished. As was Merduk by the looks of things. But he had already given his reappearance away. If he was to be his shadow it made no difference. Zohex knew instinctively that he would guide the future according to his design. Which almost dovetailed with that of Prima's. Almost. What the Primaian's only dreamed of he would actuate. Ruler of all worlds. Nothing could be simpler.

**Sumtek Monastery, Kathmandu Valley: the present.**

The monks saw Amithama as a Rinpoche having achieved Buddha mindfulness. Since then he had mediated and paid homage to the celestial representation of the gold plated statue of Adibuddha. Whilst in deep mediation Amithama had noticed an awakening within the effigy. Not in words direct but by extruding from unformed space a cosmic mandala. Which Amithama copied and used as a foundation to explore it's hoary secrets. Adibuddha the counterweight of earthly existence anchoring Amithama in the present so as not to be absorbed by the vastness of the black mandala. He was in good hands. Adibuddha was one of the supreme manifestations in the pantheon of brilliant reincarnations. His body of imperishable light the outpouring of his pure intellect and

wisdom. Being as such the lord of all Buddhas. The black mandala whilst physically created by Amithama was to him really a re-creation of its contents harking back millennia when Hindu émigrés had conveyed it for safe keeping at the foothills of the Himalayas. With good reason. It was deemed infested with a dark and dangerous power inimical to all life. Leading to the many gates of Hell. As such Amithama had intended to clear it of its foul detritus, his life's ambition. Dedicating every breathing moment to its purification.

His knees creaked a little as he assumed his lotus position in front of the wise and benevolent Buddha. Candles flickered nervously around him. Dimly illuming the offerings of fruit and flowers in front of the statue. A butter lamp was suspended behind the mediating monk. He had risen well before the others had woken for morning prayers.

Today the frigid air in this near secret cavern deep in the bowels of the monastery. Flowing into his body making him feel numb, almost paralytic. The chill of the pre dawn absolute with the cold radiating out of the subterranean rock. With the black mandala beneath him he contemplated the statue. He did not chant, the mandala might resonate in ways that was not his intention, twisting the sound into that which he wished to expunge. Neither did he recite mantras that might feed it his psychic energy thus forming a diabolical link he was not yet ready for to explore further.

He merely concentrated on his breath. After a while he felt warmer. Yet the calmness of the breathing cycle was today fraught with niggling distractions.

An ice cold jolt of menacing energy punched its way out of the mandala, straight up his spine and into his mind. The mandala all around him. Formless with absolute space replacing reality. The cloak of darkness complete, enshrouding him. It was the only buffer he had from what gestated beyond its dark curtain which his mind must have

created to stop him from being utterly overwhelmed. To create a centre Amithama conjured the statue he had been devoted to for years now. But the half smiling visage of the usual serenity of the lord of all Buddhas was one of icy indifference.

The universe represented by the black mandala with its countless gates to hell were quivering on the brink of manifesting themselves into this reality. Something was being undone, a gate was being opened, then several. His mind sharpened by the icy impregnation Amithama willed the darkness into the Adibuddha. The silent wind howled within and around him blowing out the candles and butter lamp. For a fleeting moment he saw the image of a distant mountain, an ancient grotto where once had reigned an insane warlord who had threatened to conquer not just Earth but other realms within space just as this mandala closed off the gates to hell. The two momentarily linked. Amithama had stumbled upon an ancient secret. One threatening to enter the present at that distant now extinct mountain fortress.

With preternatural energy Amithama battled the forces beyond the dark curtain now quivering as inimical powers threatened to re-resurrect themselves. He did all he could to draw out the poison and into himself, statue and mandala. The image of Adibuddha collapsed into dust. The mandala vanished. He knew though that it had merely rematerialised in that distant mountain. Which could be anywhere. Since he had needed the shroud of darkness to protect himself he had no idea as to where it was. Others though would and for different reasons. They would make their moves and he would need to be aware of their quest to take possession of its inimical powers. Amithama's self protecting darkness fell away like the end of a spring shower. He knew what he had to do. Go find the location where this heinous ingress threatened the present.

To achieve that he would have to leave the monastery and not as he was. He would revert to his previous incarnation as Yehensho.

The fact that the mandala had moved indicated an intelligence instigated the move. To a location that would facilitate a planned preconceived ingress. He doubted it was beneficent. The collapsed statue, a pile of dust was proof enough of its inimical intent. He decided to see the abbot prior his departure.

Listening to Yehensho in his sparse cell, no different to the others except those in the dormitory the abbot suspected the worst. He understood the need for his protégé to acquire a different personality in his quest to seek the source of the missing black mandala. The collapse of the statue was perturbing. It meant its essence had dissipated. Both knew of the transience of the contents of perceived reality. Even unto the mind. They agreed the Panchen Lama who was visiting the Dalai Lama would both have to be informed. They did not explore the meaning of this transition, this preternatural phenomena or its possible consequences. That their restless minds would deal with in due course. The abbot wished Yehensho well, gave him his blessings and Yehensho made his way into the world.

In holy conference in the foothills of Kashmir in a sprawling complex of buildings scattered around them the abbot sat with both the Panchen and the Dalai Lama. Tea had been served and now it was time for decisive thinking. They were comfortable in the old lounge chairs around the low tea table out on the veranda overlooking the green fertile valley below.

“We are in great peril.” The Panchen Lama said solemnly. It was a gut feeling. He was not bothered with right thinking. He was reacting to the intelligence brought by the concerned abbot. The Dalai Lama kept his council. The abbot had not come to any decisive conclusion regarding the collapse of the statue or the vanishing of the mandala. Reality was transient. Nothing lasted, not even life. Perhaps its concept but then what were ideas? Fantasies conjured by the restless mind. That it was a mystery could not be doubted. That its portents indicated immediate danger he preferred to consider not as an actuality. However it made sense to explore dark possibilities. After all this particular mandala was unique. Its history vague, predating the monastery by who knew how many millennia. Its creator perhaps having at the time of passing over reinserted himself into its multiversed domains for who knew what sinister reasons. There was certainly no evidence even indicating who such a potent being had not just created it, or perhaps simply been its servant in removing it from some hellish fiend who’s designs were anything but peaceful. Angry deities had to be assuaged. That they existed was beyond doubt. If only because human sentients breathed life into them through wrong thoughts, wrong action leading to cataclysmic results. Disturbing the serenity of the cosmos.

“Peril will always be with us.” The Dalai Lama half smiled. “What this portents is a change in the fabric of space. There are several scattered throughout the world both in time as well as location.” He went on distracted by being thirsty. “It has been said by some,” he indicated that this was more hearsay than revealed information, “that when all the mandala’s open a new age, what our Indian friends call a Yuga will begin.” Saying this as if he were actually looking forward with relish of the potential changes to come. “A master will appear who in control of these black mandalas will refashion the universe according to his capricious whim. And it will be nothing like this Kali Yuga, this age of



material transition. It is said,” revealing somewhat reluctantly the fruits of his studies, “that then the Buddhas will recede back to the point of their origins, their manifestation. Not only that but powerless to intercede in the benevolent progress we envisage for the human race.” Hinting that he was of the race but more as a visitor passing through. “Whatever our concerns, our fears, our disturbing thoughts will be put in perspective as being wholly irrelevant in comparison.” He said calmly and poured himself more tea offering the pot to his visitor.

“Usurped?” the abbot aghast.

“Usurped?” the Dalai Lama laughed. “When the Chinese invaded our ancient homeland they actually did Buddhism a favour by bringing it from its self imposed seclusion into the open to the benefit of the world at large. If the mandalas connect by whatever means, open technology, nefarious occult knowledge it will reverse all the gains we have made. It will make the Chinese seem merely to be obstreperous children throwing a tantrum. Someone, I hope it is someone and not some-thing,” he paused for the difference to sink in though given their rapt attention it was of minor consequence, “is tampering with the forces, the laws of the universe. And not for our benefit.” He finished calmly. His equanimity serene even if the message was extremely disturbing.

“What can we do?” asked the stricken abbot, frightened.

“Through deep penetrating mediation techniques find the centre of this manifestation. And the best place to start,” the Dalai Lama smiled at the two of them, “watch for monstrous events which will unfold. The instigator will I hope cloak his manipulations. I say ‘his’ reservedly. It could be anything. An ancient deity awakening, a master of the dark arts having waited centuries perhaps to plan his moves or an artifice of alien origins following orders from a third party. So one assumes it is imperative to trace

its origins. Then root out the evil.” The Dalai Lama made it seem so simple. Just another sunny day in Kashmir.

“Evil.” The Panchen Lama exhaled putting down his cup. As if this was some tedious interruption that they would have to deal with, albeit reluctantly. “The ignorant will be deluded by signs. I like the idea that this could be something alien. We know there are life forces in the universe somewhere so that their actions will appear strange to our way of thinking.” He said relaxed. “I do not think the black mandala itself is a power. But I concur with my friend here that out of all the possibilities that of an alien ingress cannot be ruled out.”

“An alien ingress.” The abbot moaned.

“I would like to concur with our esteemed Panchen Lama. Totally so. But even I could be deluded.” The Dalai Lama chuckled. “It might be working its effects on me as I speak. You know,” taking another sip of his green tea, “our scriptures speak of multiple worlds, multiple realities, even a multitude sets of time. That is what makes this universe so vibrant, so wonderfully imperfect. The black mandala could be fashioning the universe according to its dark design. And not that we weren’t warned.” He stopped eyeing them with intense interest. The Panchen Lama was quite happy to observe whilst the poor abbot grappled with this possible change of reality.

“The remnants of these other realities reveal themselves in our dreams. By that I mean the human race. Etched into the unconscious. Cultural accretion distorts these images but not their content. Think of nightmares. They could become real as there are vestiges of what can be if we do not stop this ingress. We are all possible candidates simply by having inquisitive minds. The lure of the forbidden.” The Dalai Lama sighed. “So abbot. We are in debt for your coming here. Return to your monastery and be

vigilant. Maybe the black mandala will reappear, then again maybe not.” He laughed.

“Be aware of strange symptomatic manifestations. This is only the beginning. What may or may not occur is not beyond our powers to act decisively. Through vigilance may we recognise aberrant signs. We may even suffer karmic retribution.”

“Why is that your holiness?” the abbot asked.

“Because dear friend we may have to go against everything the Buddha has taught.”

The next day after the abbot had left the Panchen and Dalai Lama decided to go for a walk in the garden of their mountain retreat. The air cool and refreshingly crisp. The sky a cloudless dazzling blue. The mountains covered in snow. Serenity.

“What a beautiful day.” The Panchen Lama said, meaning it. The universe might be about to undergo a phenomenal change but that did not detract from the magnificence of the moment. “And to think what may happen.” He trailed off.

“Yes.” The Dalai Lama concurred. They kept walking along the gravel path, admiring the bare trees, the well tended shrubs and manicured lawn. The fields below the retreat were fallow, the harvest safely stored. The hard work of autumn over. Monks around them taking their leisure. Some were reading in the sun, other discoursing on the nature of things, some engrossed in solitary contemplation.

“About this mandala and the disappearance of the Adibuddha.” The Panchen Lama began tentatively, his erstwhile companion encouraging him to continue, “I have been thinking. Could they be related? That it was an emanation, a projection of the mandala itself?”

“Interesting. It appears the statue was not just mute matter it seems. Dormant energy. Not an easy feat I believe.” For they both knew that the people believed a Buddha actually resided within the statue. That by psychically wishing it to be so it was so. Now a relic

“If it is an intelligence which has withdrawn itself into perhaps its or another realm of hell to even get here prior its exit it must have conquered the void overcoming the Tathagatagarbha, the matrix of all Buddhas. Now that is a feat worthy of a deity of hell. Squatting in the very centre of the mandala. Accessing the undecaying condition of the void to thus be in simultaneous realms.”

“Using karmic energy to control the planes of reality, uniting multiplicity then resurrecting a cosmos from one of the many realms of hell. But which one?” the Dalai Lama pondered.

“Indeed.” A flicker of a smile.

“We seem to have a dilemma. If we act we might be creating exactly that which we wish to negate.”

“And conversely of we do not act then the result...”

They continued to walk in silence, taking in their surroundings. So at peace.

“You studied at Sumtek, correct?”

“Yes I did.” The Panchen Lama wondering when it dawned on him. “Create another mandala!”

The Dalai Lama smiled, his eyes twinkling.

“And enter it. Trace the Adibuddha.”

“It is but a thought.” Being oblique. “The abbot will assist you.”

“He seems rather perturbed.”

“It is a good sign. Overconfidence would be inimical to our efforts here. I think there is a flaw in Adibuddha’s plan.”

“If he is that.” The Panchen Lama even surprising himself.

“You have a point. It could be any deity self extracting or using the Adibuddha as a cover. Beware of false images.”

“Yes. Agreed.”

They walked towards a pond where lilies floated on the unruffled waters. Beneath darted flashing red luminous goldfish.

“As a first premise we have to accept that Adibuddha, or whoever he is,” acknowledging his friend’s cautious supposition, “has mastered the mandala. He must be aware of the potential of his power. And the world, the realm itself would be a potent source. Thus he is not working alone.” Not too certain with that. It might well be this entity was exactly doing that. Totally mastering the realm from whence he drew his energy.

“A renegade god creating his own yuga.”

“We have to create a mandala of the void. Then we will see what manifests where.” The Dalai Lama happy with that.

“I expect you wish to have things set in motion.”

“With the blessings of all the Buddhas. We will certainly have need of them.”

“You know I am actually looking forward to the challenge.”

“Is that so? You know that the very fabric of space could be transformed into complexities utterly inimical to our comparative serenity. It could be a demon you know thinking itself potent enough to usurp this reality.”

“Nothing is eternal.” The Panchen Lama answered more with hope than conviction.

“Not even that.” The Dalai Lama could not help himself, chuckling

### **Napier Valley, NSW, Australia**

Another year of drought. The oppressive heat hammering everything into lifeless submission. Martin pulled over to the side of the road admiring the valley had had left to pursue history at Sydney University. Butterflies in his stomach as he surveyed the yellow glaring scene unfolded below. The old Kingswood a veritable box of hot steel. Getting out of the car he stretched his legs lighting a cigarette.

In front of him lay the place of his birth. In the shimmering heat he could make out the town huddled amongst a cluster of pepper and gum trees. The silence around him absolute, almost. There was no traffic but he could hear a tractor somewhere in the distance. Napier the area known by the nearly dried up river bed meandering through the valley had left its stamp upon him. The old homely comfort of childhood basking him with a warm inner glow. The tree covered hills were as he remembered them. Owned by a paper mill that had no longer any use for them.

He stamped out his cigarette. Feeling reluctant to continue for some reason. With his absence upon returning he felt for the first time the odd atmosphere pervading the area. A subtle something – intangible. A feeling of elusive dominance pervading all.

Returning to the car he winced from the intense heat of the seat. He started the car his hands flinching slightly from the glowing hot steering wheel. A small truck carrying cows trundled past leaving in its wake the unmistakable smell of dung. The usual horde of flies not far behind.

The main street with its ancient awnings virtually deserted. He parked outside the old 'Colonial Hotel' having to stop himself from locking the car. He recognised none of

the locals going about their business. From the corner garage he heard a mechanic swear as the crash of metal resounded with definite clarity and finality.

The relative cool of the pub was welcoming. Some hippies were sitting in a far corner as the flies eagerly awaited his presence. From behind the bar a middle aged lady shifted from amongst the shadows.

“Schooner of Fosters’ thanks.” She pulled the rich frothy beer without looking at him.

“Warm enough for ya?” she asked by way of conversation.

“Perfect beer drinking weather. How are you Glenda?”

Her sun beaten face looked up at him as she handed him the beer. Her deep blue eyes remained puzzled until she recognised him.

“Martin Ferguson. What brings you back? We’d thought you’d been swallowed up by the big smoke.” Smiling. He handed her the money, the coins warm from the heat.

“Well you won’t believe this but you probably know anyway. This town has come even to the attention of the Sydney papers.”

She looked askance at him. Glenda knew everything there was to know, adjusting her blouse. Her look questioning. He took a long satisfying draught and sat down on a stool facing her. She had not aged since he had left.

“People have a habit of disappearing `round here.” A hint.

“That’s been going on since I was a girl. The blackfellows are always going walkabout.”

“Ah yes. But what about this Dave character?”



Recognition. Her rouged lips literally plastered with lipstick opened wide showing strong healthy teeth and a determined jaw to supplement her strong willed character.

“Probably shot through. Might have got someone pregnant.” She winked mischievously.

“Well Glenda, believe it or not this could help my research.”

“Shit ‘ey? What is it you’re doing then?”

Martin drained his glass, she poured another.

“Local myths. Checking up on the anthropologists who came through here back in the thirties. Up at ‘Folley’s Creek’.”

“Yeah, my dad remembered that. Bloke set up camp but didn’t last long if I remember. Some wag reckoned the place was haunted. Had a mental breakdown or something. Never heard of him again. Mine’s closed down by the way.”

“That must have gone down well. Leaves just the cowcockies then.” Taking a swig. It went down well. He brushed a fly away.

“How’s your parents? Haven’t seen ‘em since they shifted.”

“Love the South Coast. Maybe come this way Chrissie time.”

“That’d be nice. Doing OK?”

“Reckon. They were lucky. Sold while the going was good.”

“Gonna see anybody I know?” she smiled.

“Heading out to the ‘Reeveby’s first. Then back to the old place.” Without saying why. The disappearances.

“Staying there?” she asked not missing a beat.

“Since you mention it Glenda can you put me up if you’re not booked out.”

“Try the other one.”

“You’re kidding. Not that brothel.”

“Nah just kidding. You’ll be right. I’ll give ya one of the doubles up front. Nice cool veranda. That OK?”

“Perfect. Listen. I’ll head off, see the folks out there and be back later this arvo.”

Draining his schooner.

“By the way, your mate Mike’s married.”

“Shit ‘ey.” Surprised. “Where’s he at then?”

“First house past the hospital. Doesn’t come in much anymore.”

“Not on the wagon?”

“Probably broke. Got three kids I think.”

“Oh dear.”

“He’s doing alright. Working as a techie for ‘Telecom’.”

“That’s right. He was always into electronics. Good on ‘im. Anyway I must be off. All the bridges still intact?”

“In this drought? Want another?”

“No thanks. See ya later then.”

She smiled at him. “Say hello to Frank and Dorothy when you get there.”

“Will do.” As he slid off the bar stool.

Out into the glaring heat. Martin opened the boot and retrieved an old towel with which he covered the driving seat. Got his head into gear as to which way to go, lit a cigarette and set off to the ‘Reevesby’s’. The hot air poured through the window drying the sweat on his face. His back was glued from perspiration to the seat.

Driving Martin pondered on the immense difference between vibrant Sydney and the near nihilistic existence looming onerously over the vast land. The nothingness tangible. The dictates of nature paramount. Except for the aborigines. As tenuous as the land itself. With a mixture of affection for the country. How the people out here adapted to the conditions irrespective of their personal wants.

Driving out of town he felt momentarily alien. The bareness even with the gums and pepper trees, the gasping wooded hills around there just the same. The quiet struggle for survival often brutal. The semi-desert continually threatening those who ventured into its domain. Testing the limits of human endurance. Watched in silence by the mysteriously indifferent aborigines.

Taking the turn to head off up the valley Martin pondered upon the contact he had had with the aboriginal farmhands back on his parents spread. Their enigmatic life leaving an impression upon him. Instilled with a burning desire to comprehend their secretive way of life. Which had led to his interest in history at whatever university would take him. His father a stern humourless man forever worried about something he never expressed. Listening with disbelief what Martin was contemplating. He had been destined to take over the farm.

Instead Martin broke with family tradition. Once he had left they sold the property. Shortly after the bottom fell out of the market. They were the lucky ones. Still a wall separated him from his parents. Martin saw no future here in conditions that had not changed much since the distant squatting days. By disassociating himself from the back breaking demands nature imposed in those who challenged her he was able to love this land of stark contrasts. See the intrinsic value beyond words, beyond conceptualisations whereas his father was more concerned with making ends meet. Now it was over.

The days were over to run a small farm in an age of increasing complexity simply because through fortuitous circumstances he had been born here. Survival dependent on the random benevolence of nature. The aborigines Martin thought understood this but the white man had different ideas which often ended in hardship and personal tragedy.

He passed a water truck. Things must be bad. The glaring yellow fields with less and less cattle and sheep. Huddled under clusters of trees for shade. A liquid languidness pervaded everything as he drove on. The rejuvenating effect of the beer was beginning to wear off. To keep his mind fresh he lit another cigarette.

Driving carefully on the hard packed dirt road the expected memories were absent replaced by a vagueness of forgotten dreams. Even the anticipation of some excitement by-passed him. He turned off and headed up a narrow dirt road. Emptiness all around. Not just the emptiness of the land but an absence in the very air. Inimical came to mind. Maybe it was the heat. A billowing cloud of fine dust trailed behind him as the Kingswood rattled over the corrugations left by last season's rain.

The absence of memories a little disappointing. The sense of a brooding something as oppressive as the heat. Ah finally. The familiar post box of his neighbours. Familiarity barely noticeable. Stopping he opened the gate as the fine dust the car had churned up caught up with him. The slight breeze covered him in its yellow film which he unsuccessfully tried to brush off. He drove through, shut the gate then bounced over the ruts. It needed grading. Frank probably had a four wheel drive.

Their old neighbours had always been polite and helpful as all country people were towards each other. With just a little animosity between them. Frank and Dorothy were genuine pioneers. Their family having come to this valley in the 1830's. His family arriving fifty years later gaining vast tracks of land as far as the head of the valley. Much

of it was too rugged for grazing but they had the river. Still Dorothy and Frank always had their share of water.

Their homestead was hidden from the road as he snaked up the hill. The track then dipped down through a small creek bed. Up again and there was the house with its large veranda. He drove right up to the front and was glad to get out. The dust enveloped him once more.

The creaking sound of a fly screen door. Dorothy. Glad to see her. A reticent woman exuding a gentle quiescence. Hardly changed. Her face a study of silent affection. She expected nothing from people yet accepted everything with steadfast equanimity. Walking towards her he was stuck by the depth of her warm brown eyes as she greeted him. He smiled his welcome as she fidgeted with her hands, fussing with the cotton girdle of her blue floral dress. For a moment he discerned a silent troubled agitation flitting across the warmth of her smile. It passed. She beckoned him into the cool of the house. A blue heeler barked at him but kept its distance.

“Down boy.” The dog obeyed.

“Hello Mrs Reevesby.”

“Do call me Dorothy.” She answered as she held the screen door open for him.

“How was the trip?”

“So so. I forgot how hot it gets out here.”

“Yes. Having a bit of a dry spell.”

“Tanks holding out?”

“Down to the last two. Bore’s doing alright so are the dams. Come into the kitchen.”

“Passed a water truck. Haven’t seen them for who knows how long. Been like this for a while?”

“Haven’t had decent rain for a few years now. Frank keeps a record but, yes, been a while. Cuppa?”

“Yes thanks, that’d be nice. How is Frank?”

“Managing.” Laconic. “You see him in town?”

“No. Stopped off at the ‘Colonial’. Glenda’s still there.”

“Can’t imagine the place without her. Her husband’s left her you know.”

“Really?!”

“Actually she threw him out.” Busy preparing tea.

“I don’t believe it. I remember what a great bloke he was.”

“That was the reason. Preferred drinking with his mates while she did all the work. Then he started gambling...” needing to say no more.

“So money disappeared. The horses?”

“Club across the road.”

“Pokies, they never pay. How’s your new neighbours?”

“Fine. Property prices have fallen. Your parents were lucky getting out when they did.”

“They’ll pick up again. Couple of good seasons.”

“Hasn’t been this bad since the fifties.”

“All I remember is the long hot summers. Thought it was normal back then.”

“So what brings you out here?” pouring the boiled water into the teapot. “Passing through?”

“Didn’t Frank tell you? Phoned him, ahm, last week.”

“Yes he did mention it. Something to do with Dave shooting through.” She poured the tea into two large mugs. “Sugar?” Martin nodded. “Milk’s off.”

“No worries. I think it’s something else Dorothy.”

“Dave you mean? Goes on all the time ‘round here. Not the sort of place many can cope with.”

“That’s just it Dorothy.” Sipping his scolding tea. She followed suit looking at him with a happiness that touched him. A sweet woman. Content. “Been doing some research. It ain’t natural.”

She seemed to understand. “Nothing you can do about it. By the way we’ve gone into a co-op with the others in the valley here. Joined up your old property.”

“Good move. Pooling resources. Been doing it in New Zealand for a while now. Better chance of survival I reckon. So what are they like, your new neighbours?”

“Jim and Susan? They came down from the north-west. Said it hadn’t rained there for nearly ten years. Waited a couple of good seasons then moved down here.”

“And brought the weather with them.”

“Irony isn’t it?” she smiled and put some biscuits on the kitchen table. Martin shooed the flies away.

“Now that youse are a co-op I guess it’s easier running the two farms as one.”

“Yes. Still doing beef and sheep. Sold their beef stock to us and went into pigs. We’re doing horses. Got some good stock too.” Happy with that.

“Great.”

“You have to diversify. Our farms are too small for real beef production. Even the abattoir’s gone.”

“That’s no good. The one at Wongilla still there?”

“One blessing. Bit of a drive though.”

They heard the rattle of a four wheel drive.

“That’d be Frank.” Dorothy rose wiping her clean hands on her apron. The squeak and clang of the screen door followed by heavy footsteps. Martin rose automatically.

Frank looked like an old bodgie. He still greased his black hair and combed it into a duck’s tail. Fierce blue eyes creased into a weather-lined face. They greeted each other, shook hands, pleasantries exchanged.

Frank sat, poured himself a cup. “So Martin,” who had sat, “you wanna find out what happened to Dave?” dunking a biscuit which he munched thoughtfully.

“Not just Dave Frank. The others as well.”

“Talk to Tom and Allen. They were with him at the time.”

“Really? Papers said nothing.”

“Papers know nothing, not your way anyway.”

Dorothy sat content to listen.

“What about the local rag?”

Frank smiled. “Dave did not disappear.”

Martin attentive waiting for Frank to spit it out.

Frank continued: “I saw the Sydney papers too. We all had a good laugh at the club. I don’t know who that hack who wrote that story was talking to but he ballsed it up completely.”

“So what happened then?” the tea a bit cooler.

“David the foreman your parents hired after you had gone east, before they sold the place by the way, had gone off to check the rabbit fence on the western boundary when Allen I think came back to tell us they found him dead.”



“Who was with him?”

“Tom and Allen like I said. No violence, no nothing. The police cleared them. No evidence. Died in his sleep. Where this disappearance came from lord only knows.”

“Something’s wrong here.”

“You’re telling me.” Then boring his eyes into Martin’s. “But I can tell you this. There’s a rumour going `round that the Abos had something to do with it.”

“What?!”

“Funny what? Dave despised them, treated them like shit. Tom and Allen are swearing revenge trying to find the bastard that did it.” Frank said in a flat monotone, reciting facts. According to local wisdom.

Martin scratched his head. “What about the others?”

“What others?”

“You know.” Martin prompted.

“See Colson, principal of the high school. Runs the historic society now that Dick Anderson’s passed away.”

“I remember Dicky. An old stick in the mud. The things he used to get upset about when we were at school. Wouldn’t last long in the city. The kid’s’d give him a nervous breakdown no worries. When did he leave his mortal coil?”

“Few years back. Surprised just about everybody. Still, you never know when your number’s up.” Frank said resignedly. “Where you staying then?”

“The `Colonial’. Well thanks for your time.” Standing. “Thanks for the tea Mrs Reevesby. Might drop in before I leave.”

“Staying long?”

“Depends. I’ll see Colson, check out the papers, have a few beers. Catch up with Mike who I hear is married now.” Martin shrugged his shoulders. “See what happens.”

They said their good-byes. Frank walked with him to his car.

“Martin.” Frank’s tone changed. “This town’s changed since you and your parents left.”

“The drought can’t be easy to bear.”

“It’s more than that. It’s the Abos.”

Martin was puzzled. “They always been around. Never had any real trouble with them before.”

“That was before.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The government bought PMA’s land and gave it back to them extending their reserve eastwards.”

“I still don’t get it.”

Then came the tirade. “You been in the city too long. We’re all going broke here slowly but surely. We’re not stupid. I know the Yanks and the Europeans are dumping their produce all over the markets. And the government does nothing except bleat platitudes as economic conferences go nowhere. We’ve had drought here for nearly seven years. But we get bugger all and suddenly they buy the mill’s land for millions and give it to the Abos. This country depends on us. As long as we’re working we’re earning a crust not bludging on the dole like some people ’round here. Like I said. Plenty of money for the blacks. People reckon we’re being driven from the land by design. Land worked for generations. Mate, we even fought for this country.” Then having vented his spleen

calmed a bit. “All I’m saying is, go easy.” Then the rant dissipated. “Might see ya in town and have a few coldies. Say hello to your parents when you see them.”

“Thanks for your time Frank and your advice.”

Driving back into town Martin mulled over what Frank had rambled on about. Small farmers caught in a web of circumstances from which there seemed no way out. Accept perhaps leave uneconomical unviable farms. World economics was seeing to that. But to take it out on the aborigines was going about it the wrong way. That the paper mill had sold the land to the government was not the aborigines fault. The money was earmarked from a different department altogether. Frank might as well get upset that money was being spent on libraries.

Martin headed out to the local high school at the southern edge of town. He saw a few straggling students as the last school bus pulled away full of screaming kids. A few cars left in the car park. The place looked the same. He still knew where the headmaster’s office was.

A prim middle aged lady asked what he wanted. Talking through a glass panelled counter did not help.

“I understand your principal Mister Colson is the president of the historic society.”

“Indeed yes.”

“Could I see him?”

She hesitated, implying he was busy.

“I’ve come up from Sydney. I know I should have called but now that Dicky, I mean Mister Anderson has passed away I am at a bit of a loss.”

“You were a student here then?” she asked brightening.

“Yes. Martin Furgeson’s the name. I left a few years ago. It’s been a while.” He added, hoping.

“I can find out when the society meets Mister Furgeson.” Which he could have anyway.

“What I would really like is to examine their records. Research material to be precise. Mister Colson would be invaluable as to whether their stuff is relevant.”

“What is it that interests you. Maybe I can be of help.” Which was not what he wanted. Still it was best to go along with her line of thinking.

“I’m a post grad in history at Sydney University. And since I was born here,” better leave the real reason unsaid, but use his being an ex-local for what it was worth, “I thought it natural to source my material here. Meaning Napier in general.” Smiling.

“I’ll see if he can see you.” Relief. She picked up the phone turning her back to him. She exchanged a few words then turned cheerily. “He’s got a few minutes to spare. Down the corridor last on the right.” Martin thanked her for her time.

The large bright airy office was still the same. A large mahogany desk the only addition he could remember. The ponderous bookshelf to one side of Mister Colson who was looking up at him expectantly. Perhaps relieved at the interruption. Silhouetted by the large window, the slats of the venetian blinds obscuring the man seated in front of him. Rising. Still robust in his fifties with a shining bald head now Martin’s eyes had adjusted. They shook hands.

“Martin Furgeson I believe. Can’t place you. Perhaps I had no need to ever see you. How can I be of assistance. Please be seated.” Shuffling some papers to one side, then when both were seated let his eyes scrutinise this once student of his.

“I remember your predecessor Mister Anderson. We called him Dicky.” To break the ice.

“Ah yes.” His voice a rich baritone. “Passed away much too early. Now what brings you here?”

“As I was saying to your secretary I am researching the history of the Napier Valley and as you are the president of the historic society I thought it best if I saw you first before delving into the records of the local newspaper.”

Colson smiled cryptically. Martin ploughed on.

“My parents sold their property a few years back. Now at that time, rather let me correct myself, since I can remember there used to be a church on our land. Now derelict. My parents donated some papers from its time to the society. It is these I wish to study.”

Colson opened his drawer and retrieved his pipe. He studiously filled then lit it. Thoroughly enjoying the fragrant tobacco.

“Did your parents ever reveal their contents?” puffing away in a haze of blue smoke.

“If they did Mister Colson...”

“Please call me David.” Another outburst of clouds creating a curtain between them.

“...mention anything,” Martin dissembled, “I can’t remember. It was over a decade ago.”

“I remember Richard wanted to give them to the new church. The local clergy, can’t think of his name, himself seeming erudite thought it best if we would keep them.”

“That was nice of him.”

“It was. Now we meet once a month which would not be convenient to you.”

Consulting his watch as the smoke drifted to a fly specked ceiling. Ignoring the large wooden grandfather clock to one side. “I should be through here within the next hour or so. If you could meet me in say an hour and a half I could make the reading room available to you.”

“It doesn’t have to be today. Tomorrow would be fine.”

“In that case,” puffing away, more fragrant blue smoke, come and see me after eight in the morning. I’ll get in touch with one of our volunteers allowing you access. They will assist you in finding what you want.”

“That would be excellent David. I ought to show you my referral from my professor.” Retrieving a folded envelope he had jammed in his back pocket and handed it to the principal. Colson was satisfied as to Martin’s veracity, handing it back.

“Tomorrow at eight then.” More puffs of smoke rising slowly. The room was turning blue in the afternoon light.

“Thank you for your time and effort. The society will get credit for this.” Colson beamed his thanks.

As Martin drove back to the pub he got mentally ready for the task ahead. As with any historic documentation a researcher has to wade through copious amounts of irrelevant material. The goings on in any community, irrelevant of size will always contain the trivial and the mundane. The stuff of daily life. But tucked away amongst all this a diligent purveying of material will lead to the relevant information sought. Eventually. Maybe. At least he knew the documentation was there.

The assistant, another middle aged lady, Hazel was more than helpful. Within a short time Martin's rickety desk was piled high with grimy old files. Dust motes swirled in the gloomy room. He skipped lunch and by the afternoon had found what he wanted. It was disturbing. As expected. He was also amazed that people took the events for granted. That death and unaccounted disappearances amongst their community was taken so lightly.

Mr Johnston's death, the first to be recorded was explained as suicide. His neighbour one Samuel Dickinson vanished shortly after discovering the body. They both had holdings around 'Folley's Creek'. They had been squatters back then. Later the colonial government granted the spread to Joshua Macintyre. They vanished during a flash flood presumably trying to save stock. Their bodies were never found.

By the 1890's things were changing. Various land acts had been passed aiming to give small holders some of the remaining land the squattocracy had [mis]appropriated for themselves. The leases covered land of inferior quality, including land west of 'Folley's Creek.'. To be kept on condition that it was 'improved'. Martin knew the area. Most of it was scrub. But it did impinge on the local aborigines who roamed there. With land being sold at a little over one penny per acre his great grandparents felt secure in their tenure. Or so they thought.

At that time Napier was still little more than a shantytown. Then gold was discovered to the north of the valley. The mine started, the town exploded to around ten thousand souls. Martin's great grandparents of Scottish descent were devout Protestants. They built a small chapel on the property, not an unusual occurrence in those times. A preacher visited them roughly once a month. Not only did he minister to the needs of the families and the farm hands but in those times tried to convert the natives.

At first everything seemed fine but not for long. The aborigines stopped going to the service. With hindsight Martin could guess why. His ancestor though was not dismayed in spreading the gospel. He took with him a preacher to go amongst them. His philosophy was simple: 'If the mountain won't come to Mohammed then Mohammed will have to come to the mountain'. On one of these proselysing journeys which Martin suspected had ulterior motives, the preacher vanished. These men on a mission going out west beyond the 'Cradle' as the locals dubbed the hinterland went probably to ascertain the quality of the land in more detail. After the disappearance of the preacher his ancestor ceased his missionary work. Shortly thereafter the church was abandoned. Some mention was made of saving the journal of the preacher. Not that Martin found it in this small hall. His parents might still have it in their possession.

Nor was this the end. In the early twenties a team of anthropologists arrived. Headed by a Doctor Stephen Homer he tried to salvage what he could for posterity the changing, more like vanishing way of life of the aborigines. Their tribal nomadic existence. By then Homer stated the clans were suffering from total cultural disintegration. Much of this he blamed on the missionaries who had arrived in Napier during the relatively late gold rush. He must have managed to strike a working relationship with the tribal elders, obviously gaining their confidence. No supplementary source notes Martin found to his dismay.

Ten years later one of his assistants returned. It was the time of the great depression. The aborigines social conditions and their health had deteriorated dramatically. Their needs given the difficult times largely ignored. Mentioning his predecessor they opened up to him revealing some of their mythology and the associated culture heroes who had created their Dreamtime. Martin was getting closer. But to what?



As with all oral memories accuracy is important. Their secret lore handed down from initiate to initiate. The Napier Valley held an especial significance. At last, something Martin realised, now all attention. The tribe known as the Pinja took their name from the great god in the sky. Fire was sacred having been given to them in solemn secrecy. Unfortunately one of their kind, the Moon god Bahloo had attained the secret by deception. But Bahloo was powerful in his own right and escaped. Here the myth became somewhat fuzzy for he might also have been banished.

Either way the results were catastrophic for the Pinja. Their god, unnamed, angered at the divine transgression took his fury out upon them by hurling a huge ball of fire into their midst. It created the 'Cradle' and the valley no doubt. It also dispersed them further inland. After the calamity Bahloo returned and took possession of the valley along with the tribe to whom they were united. Martin could not find a reference as to who these other aborigines were. Bahloo was now supreme. But not for long. Another war occurred and this time the Pinja were victorious. The Bahloo tribe were annihilated although their medicine men escaped swearing revenge.

Homer's assistant, a Dr Stuart Neville followed up the story of Bahloo but never finished his project. He ended up having a mental breakdown. There the records ceased. The war intervened stifling any further research. With the changing political climate other priorities took precedent. With what little, overall research grants were available by the sixties all interest had ceased in the valley.

There was a footnote though. One of Neville's students returned to the area back in the fifties. Delving into the myth of Bahloo had tragic consequences. Ending up in a psychiatric ward with a suspected overdose of psychotropic drugs. Which was very unusual for the times. Released several months later from the local hospital he

disappeared presumably returning to Sydney. A John Prescott. Martin made a note to try and contact Neville if he was still alive or his student Prescott.

Cramped from sitting too long Martin welcomed the return of Hazel. She coughed politely.

“How’s your research coming along then?” bright and happy.

“Marvellous. I did not think I would get much but as you can see,” he waved at his pile of notes and documents, “it has been immensely rewarding.”

“I’m glad. We don’t have many scholars passing this way.” Looking excited.

“Can I get you a cuppa?”

“I’ll help you make it if you wish. I’m basically finished here anyway.” Martin replied solicitously, “And I want to stretch my legs.”

They retired to the little annex of the kitchen where Hazel busied herself making the tea.

“Tell me Hazel, what do you make of Dave’s death?”

She turned looking at him in all seriousness asking what he meant.

“I’ve heard the aborigines had something to do with it.”

“You should ask Tom and Allen. They were with him you know.” Not batting an eyelid.

“You believe the rumours?”

“The coroner found nothing suspicious. Maybe heatstroke.”

“Coroners can miss things.”

“I’m sure they can. They are only human after all.” Not the least ruffled.

“I understand that.” Which he didn’t. “It’s just...” Martin was searching for the right words when the kettle boiled and Hazel poured two cups asking how he liked his

tea. Martin told her. Then continued: “Well from what I can gather the aborigines, according to some seem to be held in suspicion.”

“Martin.” She said turning to him to give him his tea, “We have been here for generations. The Abos basically avoid us. They come into town for their groceries and that’s about it. Those who work on the stations keep pretty much to themselves. You should know. You grew up here. They don’t make any trouble but their silent ways make me uncomfortable.” Martin noticed she was involuntarily wringing her hands. “And not just me. We all feel it.”

This was new. “So you reckon there is something about them then?”

“When we have a westerly we can hear their corroborees, their chanting. They are returning to their old ways. It’s eerie I can tell you that much.”

“A revival?”

“You could say that. Can’t you remember?”

“Well as a kid you sort of accept everything. And no I can’t remember. I might have forgotten.” He said thoughtfully. Sipping his tea and remembering the strange dreams he had as a kid. Accepted for what they were: nightmares.

Plodding footsteps made both of them turn to see who had come. It was Colson, pipe in his mouth. Leaving a trail of smoke in his wake.

“Hazel good to see you. Young Martin. Apologies. Shouldn’t say ‘young’ but at my age anybody under thirty looks young to me.” He smiled depreciatingly.

Martin dismissed it with a laconic wave of his hand.

“How’s it coming along then.” Peering into the gloom where the archives were.

“I’ve actually got all I can here.”

“That is splendid. I’m glad our old records were of some use to you. What is it you were after. I mean in the sense of the, ahm, disappearances.” Giving a quick look at Hazel.

“I don’t quite know yet.”

“Before you go on, sorry Martin. But would you like a cup of tea?”

“No thank you. Hot enough as it is. Go on Martin.”

“Something is happening here beyond the norm. Has and had I should say. We know that there was some resistance from the aborigines as they lost their lands. Prey on unaccompanied colonists, ambushing them. Waging a sort of guerrilla war. Bound to be disappearances. But many of them happened recently. Now from what I can gather the authorities certainly ruled out murder so that they categorised it euphemistically that the vanishing was caused by ‘person or persons unknown’ to have been the case.”

Colson’s shining bald dome nodded sagely. A plume of smoke billowing towards the fly specked ceiling. “So you think there is something unusual about this?”

Martin shook his head. He felt the conversation was running ahead of him. Trying to gather his thoughts he lit a cigarette. They all remained standing.

“Two things seemed unresolved. Your predecessor Richard Anderson died at too early an age as did David our old foreman. Neville had a mental breakdown as did Prescott. They all came to grief around ‘Folley’s Creek’. I gather it has some significance to the aborigines. Do you think,” Martin trying to pre-empt Colson and maybe Hazel, “that they are trying to warn us off the area?”

“Most certainly.” Colson answered determinedly.

“Including death?” not wishing to use ‘murder’.

Colson smiled. He shook his head. “You’re avoiding the word. Through fear.”

“Fear?” even Hazel was surprised. Then took Martin’s cup, rinsing it. But listening. She belonged to the society after all.

“It is common knowledge that in the last couple of years quite a few aborigines have also been found deceased around here. The coroners returned open verdicts. Probably tribal payback. It’s impossible to ascertain who the culprits were. We believe Dave’s death was somehow involved with them.”

“Did the coroner note this?”

“Martin, if I would say this publicly I would be run out of town. People would laugh at me. I am a high school principal. If I accept the notion that their medicine men are in possession of some sort of power then I would be admitting to the validity of the superstitions of the stone age. How do you think that would go down ‘round here?”

Martin sighed. “I see your point. As such our little conversation is strictly off the record.”

“I am glad you appreciate my position, as does Hazel here.” She nodded.

“Do you agree with Colson?” Hazel blushed but nodded her ascent. Then said: “Martin I am the librarian here. I collate the material. What our president says is not without foundation. Though most people would not refer to it with such direct an expression. But yes, I feel the aborigines have a disturbing effect on our community here.”

“I see.” Martin accepting her view. “Though as yet I myself do not fully understand what it is exactly they disturb you with.” Might as well.

“The corroborees.” David said, Hazel nodding.

“That is what I said to Martin just before you came.” She added. There was a studied silence.

“Well thank you for everything you have done for me. If you’ll excuse me I’ll get my notes.” Martin disappearing into the reading room. When he returned with his briefcase he found Hazel and David had tidied the tiny kitchen. Hazel bade them both farewell. Martin waved in return then looked at David.

“Want to come for a beer at the club? There is someone you might wish to talk to.”

“Bonza. I’d be delighted. My shout by the way.”

The RSL Club was across the road from the ‘Colonial Hotel’. The foyer decked out in a garish sixties look. Teak panelled walls with a picture of the Queen looming over reception. Colson was a member and Martin signed in using his driver’s license as his ID. It was a small club. The moment they walked in through the glass doors the tinkling sounds of tinny tunes and spilling coins from the poker machines were interspersed with the hum of conversations. A thin pall of smoke hung in the air. Colson led towards the brightly lit bar where Martin bought two schooners of VB. Colson looked around for a table away from the poker machines. Seated he said as Martin put down their beers: “Those things annoy me. Some clubs put them to one side but we don’t have much room here. And not enough for an extension.”

“Well, here’s to us.” And they both took a healthy swig of cold foaming beer. “Not a bad drop.” Martin remarked. It went down well.

“Lines are good here. Clean ‘em out regularly. Not like across the road.”

“You saying Glenda’s a bit slack?”

“And the fact that their beer comes from the cellar. All makes a difference to the taste.” Colson certain.

“That so? Who we meeting?” more beer down the hatch.

“Jim and Susan.”

“Ah, the folks who took over the old farm.”

“Yeah, usually come in to stock up their fridge and have a few quick ones on the way.”

“I was gonna go out and see ‘em.”

“And here they are.” David beamed as he rose to gain their attention. “Saved you the trouble then.” Martin draining his glass. He needed that.

“‘nother round then.”

“Same for Jim. Susan has a Riesling with a dash of lemonade.” Then turning to Susan continued: “Don’t ya?”

Susan was a cheery looking woman in her early forties. The face not so weather beaten, just some character lines around her happy face. Blue eyes sparkling from the small lights above. Martin up greeting them. Jim was solid brawn, around sixteen stone. They shook hands as David did the introductions then Martin went off to the bar. When he returned with the tray of beer and wine he found they were talking about the drought. Something that could not be ignored. They nodded their thanks for the shout. Martin content to listen. No point in pushing the conversation. Having got the drought out of the way, along with cattle ticks, snakes, the working dogs, bracken Jim finally turned to Martin and to his surprise asked him if he wanted another. Martin nodded his thanks.

“Likes his beer.” David remarked finishing off his.

“I’m glad. Be a boring life without it.”

“So Martin, you come to see the old farm,”

“Ah yes Mrs Eagerton. What d’you think of Napier?” as if he were a local.

“People are nice. Bit tough at the moment but we all pull through in the end. No complaints with Frank and Dorothy.”

“I hear you’ve gone co-op of sorts.”

“It’s the only way. Especially in times like these. Should manage now we share our pastures between the cattle and the horses.”

“That’s good to hear. As to what brings me here. Well,” Martin said slowly thinking how to broach the subject, “I don’t know what Frank said but as you know people are a bit upset with what happened to Dave.”

Jim returned with another round. They took their drinks.

Martin continued. Maybe the beer was helping. “From what I can gather there seems to be more than just Dave’s tragic end. Abo’s too.”

“They live their own lives out there.” Jim said matter of factly.

“Someone in town told me they’re returning to their old ways.”

“Their elders are making a comeback. Especially Jacko. Seems to be in the thick of it. Always going walkabout. Hardly see him at the farm these days.”

“So you kept him on then.”

“On the recommendation of your parents. Hardly seems worth it.”

“I thought he was always a good worker.”

“So did we until what happened to Dave. Talk to Tom or Allen.”

“Hm. As have others.”

Someone squealed in jubilation as one of the machines went into some silly tunes spilling out a pile of coins. The other machines went temporarily silent as players tried to find out who the lucky winner was.



“Well Martin. Whenever the two of ‘em have time off they head out up the creek. It’s become a real obsession with them.” Jim lighting a cigarette. Martin joined him. David s saving his pipe. Susan lit a menthol.

“I remember the place when I was a kid. You reckon they’ll be there tomorrow? No point going now, bit late in the day.”

“Give it a try. Can’t see what harm it can do.” Swigging his beer.

“Camp there?”

“Like I said as often as they can.”

“‘Folley’s Creek’. The Abo’s called it ‘Bahloo’s Bend’ didn’t they?”

“That’s right” David chimed in having gotten his pipe fumigating the table.

“That’s where they have their corroborees.”

“Well if I can get Jacko to take me there that’d be great.” Martin thought out aloud. “I should see the place before I head back.”

“When you thinking of going? Back I mean.” Jim not comfortable.

“Couple of days. Gotta see Mikey. Hear he’s married. Maybe see my parents. Find out what happened to that preacher my great great something went bush with.”

“Long time ago Martin.” As if it did not matter.

“That’s what history’s all about Mister Eagerton.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“Sure am.” Enjoying his beer.

“Country life not for you then?” Martin could feel the tension in Jim’s voice.

“Yes and no.” Martin answered easily. “I always liked history. Books are easy to deal with. Just a matter of weeding out the bullshit.”

Jim thought that amusing enough. "Well at least you're giving something a go."  
Mollified. "Gonna write about this area then."

"Been done already. Just ask David here. I'm here for the mystery." Martin  
pretending to be spooky.

"Well don't go over the top and read into things that don't exist."

"Don't worry. Not a journalist looking for a beat up. In fact if I ever get this  
monogram finished for my thesis I'll let David have a copy for the society."

David appreciated the gesture and rose to get another round. No one dissented.

"That'll be my last David." Jim said when David returned with another tray.

"Don't wanna get too much grog in me. Bit of a drive you know."

"How are your parents doing then Martin?" Susan asked stubbing out her  
cigarette.

"Happy in their retirement. Got a club almost next door. Bowling club at that."

"Your dad'd be happy there then. Heard they might be coming up for Chrissie."

"Wouldn't bet on it Susan. A big 'if'. Thanks for the beer Jim. What are we gonna  
do with Tom and Allen?"

"Beats me Martin." Jim answered.

"Reckon you know where I can find Jacko?"

"Same place if you ask me." Lifting his glass for some more. Then: "What d'you  
expect to find there Martin?"

"I really don't know. Maybe just seeing the area will be enough. See if it's the  
same as I remember it."

Jim drained his beer. Susan had already finished hers. They rose and shook hands  
once more.

“I’ll probably drop by soonish, tomorrow. If I can ask a favour.” The beer having relaxed him. “When you see Jacko ask him to wait for me.” Jim looked slightly taken aback. “Don’t worry. If you really need him I’ll reimburse you for any lost time. Uni’s paying for this. Having him as a sort of guide might help especially if the aborigines have returned to the spot. Don’t wanna cause any trouble.”

“Try ‘The Empire’. Jim suggested. Dorothy ready to leave.

“Only place’ll have ‘em. Stops ‘em from coming into this part of town. Should have come on dole day. Whole bloody tribe’s here then.” Jim said disdainfully. Martin let it pass. It did surprise him that the old rancour was still lingering. Then Jim nodded at David and went to the bar to get his slab of beer. After they had left Martin asked David if he wanted another round.

“Sure do. I’m lucky you know. Living in town. Virtually live ‘round the corner.”

“Perfect for ya.” Setting off to the bar, returning with two more schooners.

“Cheers.” They lifted their glasses.

“Martin, keep ‘Folley’s Creek’ low key will you?”

“I’m listening.” Lowering his glass.

“There’s a push by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to classify it as a sacred site.”

“That’s news to me.”

“You didn’t know then?”

Martin shook his head. David breathed an audible sigh then said: “If they take the land it would be the end of the old property. The cowcockies seeing this as further encroachment into the valley. The locals don’t mind the reservation west of the ‘Cradle’. But them getting land this side is going to cause trouble.”

“I see. Then again maybe not. But how can I cause trouble with what I’m doing?”

“Focussing outside attention. Do it softly softly. If others ask tell ‘em you’ve come back to look at the old farm, saying hello to family friends and mates or girlfriends you had.”

“Thanks. I know how news travels in these communities. I remember when my first girlfriend got a job one day, across the road. By evening the whole pub knew and we never told anybody.” Martin laughed.

“Exactly. Come on, drink up. Your shout.”

Waking shortly after sunrise, the steady rising heat had Martin up at an hour unthinkable in the city. He felt a thick boozy fog lingering in his head. He showered down the hall then dressed. Downstairs he heard Glenda walking around the hotel’s office. The floorboards creaking as he headed into the bright sunshine. The air still fresh, invigorating.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.” Glenda trying to surprise him out front.

Martin sluggish turned towards her smiling face, make up plastered as far as her neck where her naturally tanned skin showed.

“Glenda, didn’t expect you up this early.”

The street empty.

“Someone’s gotta run this place. Wouldn’t be interested in helping me ‘round here?” she asked. Martin uncertain if she was serious or pulling his leg.

“Should have asked couple of years ago. Maybe if I bomb out at uni.” He replied good naturedly.

“Where you off to then?” country inquisitiveness.

“Gonna take one last look at the old property.”

“Well say hello to the Eagerton’s for me.”

“Will do. By the way any breakfast around here?”

“Up the road then cross it. Or the place at the service station.”

“Nah. Don’t like garage eateries. Charge a bloody fortune. I’ll try the milk bar.

Suppose the same people still running it.”

“Probably. See ya later then.”

After a hearty breakfast which he needed to replace the damage done yesterday he stopped off at the garage in town to rent a trail bike for the day. Then with his trusty Yamaha 100 he headed up the valley. The air cool the highway devoid of traffic. Back in the city the roads would be congested by now. Pulling up at the farmstead the old butterflies returned. He saw Susan out the back as he got off his bike. Hanging washing on the line. It would be dry in a few hours.

“Morning Mrs Eagerton.” Taking off his helmet.

“Martin. Heard the bike but didn’t know who.”

“Well no point bringing the car up here if I’m gonna go and have a look at the creek. Seen Jacko?”

“Yes matter of fact. He’s up there somewhere. Told him you wanted to see him. Just sort of nodded, mumbled something and went on his way.”

“Your husband around?”

“He’s gone checking the fences on the western boundary.”

“Guess I won’t see him then. But I’ll try and drop by and my way back.”

“They were at it again last night.”

“The Abos?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Tom and Allen?”

“Haven’t seen them for a couple of days now.”

“Thanks Mrs Eagerton.”

He got back on his bike, put on his helmet and waved good bye. Susan returned to hanging the washing on the line.

The two people who could have helped him with Dave’s death seemed rather elusive. He needed eye witnesses for Martin had his own ideas which were not unlike Colson’s. To the aborigines medicine men had as a primary function the job to heal those who suffered from sickness induced by the spirit world. Culture heroes or malign influences originating from renegade magicians who could take lives. Mostly targeting those who had broken tribal laws. Dave could have transgressed their sacred laws – and paid the ultimate price.

He headed due north along a dusty track meandering through parched yellow grass. The sky a dazzling blue. Martin considered if there was more here than just ‘pay back’. Locals acknowledged their returning to their ancient ways. Could a potent medicine man have returned from the outback he wondered. He clicked down two gears negotiating a dry creek bed and accelerated up the other side nearly losing it. He had not ridden a bike for a while and slowed down a bit. It was tempting to open the throttle but unfamiliar with the track thought it wiser to take it easy.

‘Folley’s Creek’ could be a place of power. All societies, especially the ancients found certain areas to be psychically potent. Places of awesome cosmic mysteries later

becoming the sites of temples. To those who were especially receptive to innate subtle influences revealing the enigma of the gods.

Yet the aborigines were nomads. Thus the whole continent was covered with countless sacred sites. Unique areas harbouring memories of revelations and awesome displays of power. Their gods were not only living in the Dreamtime, they were realities in the temporal world as well.

Coming up a rise he saw the Napier river. A sliver of silver coursing through the glaring yellow landscape. Further ahead Folley's Creek. He could just make out a group of black fellas in the shimmering heat. He felt something in the air. Suddenly disinclined to investigate. Distinctly uncomfortable. The place seemed magnified, reaching out even this far back.

'You're a wimp.' Martin thought to himself. Instead he headed up the valley to the abandoned church. There as a kid he had been the lord of the lair. Maybe his Scottish ancestry coming out. Surveying the surroundings from a nearby cave pretending it to be a stronghold against invading Christians as he defended the romantic mysteries of his Celtic forebears.

The area still as rugged as he remembered though reaching it by bike was quicker than by horse. Here and there bleached off white trees lay testimony to the harsh conditions that existed in this furnace of intense heat and glaring light. Jacko came to mind telling him of the walking spirits adopting human guise. These beings had given his people powerful magic that could destroy as well as preserve life. Depending on circumstance. Jacko claimed some of these beings could even extinguish life over great distances.

Riding slowly, almost half walking the bike up the last rutted incline to his secret hide out just over the next crest. His ancient fortress holding his childhood invaders at bay. For an instant he thought he saw a blackfellow disappear beyond the cavernous opening. He clutched down to first gear kicking up pebbles and dust as the tyres tried to grip the slippering surface. Feeling the heat, the pesky flies. Feeling exhausted.

Then he was on the narrow ravine which opened into a small dusty valley dotted by scrawny bushes and tufts of parched spindly grass. In the centre the old ruined church. Dilapidated but still standing. The roof fallen in ages ago. The wood probably resident to white ants.

The heat pressed itself upon him. Its intensity relentless. He made for the cave where he would have his lunch then wait for a while before heading to Folley's Creek. He reached the cave without difficulty. Propped the bike and glad of the relative cool inside even if it did smell musty. His shirt was glued to his back after taking off the rucksack. Then for the sandwiches, a thermos of cold coffee and a book. Having finished lunch he made himself comfortable to read a hilarious science fiction story by Ursula Le Guinn. 'The Lathe of Heaven'. It was wonderfully ridiculous and extremely well thought out.

Getting tired. Sleepy. The barren rock face of the cave with its view over the parched countryside receding as he sank into oblivion.

Woken out of his slumber sensing a presence. Adrenaline pumping. Yet not wholly awake. A figure in black. Jacko? Moving silently towards him. Growing in stature as if magnifying himself. Not Jacko. Martin paralysed, transfixed filled with apprehension. Childhood fears resurrected. The entity covering the opening of the cave immersing him in darkness.



Nerves taught, his mind reeling with the primordial fear ingrained into humanity for millennia transfixing him into immobility. The darkness quivering with potency. Martins limbs as heavy as rocks. Vulnerable. The absence of light receding into infinity, the adumbration containing two small luminous lights surrounded by a faint blue haze receding into its own vastness. Fear transmuting into morbid fascination as if this volition held his life in its hands. The shape of a serpent. Held in thrall. Hypnotised by this marvel, the darkness quivering with latent energy. Its tail stretching back into its own illimitable realm.

Hovering above him, silent with preternatural intent. Its obsidian head and two shining white bright stars. Behind the looming abyss. Utterly amazed, way beyond primitive fear the luminescent serpent receded, its eyes slowly coming closer together, then forming a singular light and vanished.

The searing heat returned. The brightness out there painful. Martin cold with sweat. Shivering for a moment. Some vivid dream. Then right in front of him something flashing in the sunlight at the mouth of the cave. As he inched forward its luminosity withdrew. He recognised it as a quartz stone. No footprints.

The fear totally gone. Flushed instead with excited exuberance. No nightmare, no hallucination but a vision. Not fevered heat exhaustion. Jacko came to mind. He would know what this meant. Martin could guess. Quartz stones were held in high esteem by the aborigines. Potent sources of power. Linkages to the Dreamtime's entities. The stone was not even warm. Cool. He put it in a small zippered side pocket of his rucksack, gathered the rest of his stuff together. Quivering with barely repressed euphoria. Better than sex! And smiled at that basic comparison. He was absolutely euphoric.

Martin half rode half slid the bike back out of the valley. It was late afternoon. The shadows longer the heat oppressive. Yet he felt removed, gliding through the countryside. Through the small ravine, desolation all around. Arriving near Folley's Creek. Three figures. Two standing stock still. Hard to make out in the glare who was who. One with a gun. One slightly out of focus. He killed the engine. Then 'angel geared' slowly down the hill. Surely they must have seen him. The three seemed in their own world. Then he lost sight as he rode through a depression. He propped the bike and slowly walked up the incline. Strange reverberations pulsated the air.

Crawling up the incline, feeling both excited and stupid, like in some movie with a terrifying script sensing the animosity pulsing around him. When he got in sight he made out two whites and an aborigine. The whites had their back to him and the blackfella seemed to have very little that could be made out to be a face. He ducked back down, crawled away and made a beeline towards the river pines.

Running into Jacko. His gaze going past Martin too surprised to say anything. Wanting to ask questions. But Jacko exuded a calmness that steadied Martin's mind. Cool. Jacko's eyes opaquely illuminated. Memories of the serpent. Around them twilight. Soothing pastel colours. The landscape the same but not. The colours innate with power.

In slow motion Martin turned in the direction of Jacko's gaze. On the flat spread of river stones Tom and Allen gestulating to the aboriginal. Who was a little away from them, motionless, his back to Martin and Jacko. One of the whites gestulating wildly with his gun. The aborigine mute, silent, steady. And a subtle hum in the air. Like a bullroarer.

An aura of light began to envelope the aboriginal. The luminosity increased to a bright white glow, flames flickering fanned by an invisible wind. Thin serpentine tongues of brightness loosened from the dark figure. Surrounding, immersing Tom and Allen in

its embracing flowing glow. Writhing silently in wavering lambency. The thin wispy flames fanning into a veritable firestorm, the two forms glowing in a dazzling radiance. Then languidly drifted into the distance, flickering, disintegrating along the way. The two glowing shapes faded into a radiant fog of dust swept away by the same invisible wind. Tom and Allen had vanished.

Stunned Martin glanced to see what Jacko made of this. He was alone. Across the creek near the surrounding hills a black shape receded with preternatural swiftness into the silence of the Never-Never.

The sluggish creek resoundingly quiet. The water nearly stagnant, still. The afternoon heat oppressive. Yet Martin felt tranquil. Staring at the spot where the strange fire had consumed Tom and Allen. The black shape no longer visible in the distance. Just the parched fields, devoid of life. An atmosphere changing from that of absolute nemesis to one with a heavy bourn over everything.

Reluctantly he moved from the scene, reaching for a cigarette, lighting it, inhaled and was calmed. This was crazy. But the memory forced itself upon him. He could tell no one except Jacko. If he did they'd say he'd been on drugs. The hippies would have a field day. He got on his bike and headed back into town. Dropping in on the Eagerton's forgotten. He desperately needed a few beers.

Having dropped off the bike at the garage he made straight for the 'Colonial' where to his pleasant surprise he saw Mike. Who insisted he stay a night or two.

The next two days, being the weekend Martin remembered as one happy blur. Having talked all night with his wife Gloria who drank only marginally less than Mike they went the next afternoon with their delightful children to the local football game.

Which the local team lost again. Napier at the bottom of the competition table and Mike knew why. His friend James, who had come over the first night and who like Mike, got onto the grog the second night again drinking well into the early hours of Saturday reflected in general how the rest of the team approached the game. Sozzled. Dropped passes, missed tackles, bad calls, few line breaks and atrocious kicking cost them the game. They lost by thirty eight to four. And that wasn't a try but two penalty kicks, both horrors, which the referee awarded them to get them onto the board at least.

Then a BBQ back it Mikes where they drank once more well into the night. It was the heat. Naturally. Sunday they had a liquid lunch with Martin finally passing out around dinner time. By Monday what had occurred at 'Folley's Creek' seemed no more than a vague memory.

## **Sydney**

Professor Mark Downing, head of the History Department enjoyed his work with robust intensity. Specialising in how the religious mind rearranged perceived reality which in turn created diverse cultures right across the globe. The Stone Age of the aborigines Dreamtime. Shamanistic illusions with multiple worlds branching into both Hindu and Buddhism. The oversimplified vision of monotheism and finally with the Enlightenment the triumph of Reason. If only that applied to not just his faculty but the rest of the faculties. The incessant fervent rivalry between departments regarding intellectual recognition exercised with ferocious political manoeuvres. And that was just the background noise. Then there were the petty vindictiveness of certain individuals vying for mostly unrecognised status angling for the ultimate laurels the institution might bestow on them. As such Martin was a pleasant diversion. Someone who thought beyond the obvious markers. Not just moving the goal posts but shifting the whole field into

another dimension. Mark was backing him. This PhD was unlike any he had seen let alone considered. He had read with relish the contents of Martin's potent essay.

The young man was due in half an hour. Martin wanted to go over some primary evidence he had found at Napier. He had to look it up on the map. Way out west. All he envisaged was flat brown bareness, a few pubs and millions of flies. The Never Never.

Mark received with relish the old manuscript from Martin. Comfortably ensconced in his private office overlooking the pseudo gothic architecture of the university. Clinging plants giving it an air of venerable age. A modern monstrosity behind it. Having quickly leafed through the few pages of crabby handwriting the professor asked Martin a few questions about his great-great grandfather and the probity of the documents. Martin reassured him on that note. The perfect candidate to drive his point home how religious fervour not just twisted reason into convoluted avenues of thought but worse misunderstanding the vast Dreamtime of the aborigines. Not through ignorance, there was plenty of that, but determined bloody mindedness as to the correctness of the Christian revelation. Mark grunted in vague agreement, lit his pipe and began to read the old journal properly.

*'To the natives the corroboree is truly a pagan ritual. There is nothing like it in any of the primitive tribes scattered across God's wide Earth. It is profound and significant and something they accept as an act of faith in itself. They become immersed in ancient spirits who dwell amongst them. The elders manage somehow to see these beings though I am convinced they are charlatans.'*

*'The elders convince the uneducated members of their tribe, not unlike our ignorant Celtic ancestors, who knew not the edifying balm presented in our Lord, Jesus Christ that the hills, the rocks, trees, waterways, the animals and other significant places in nature's bounty are only revealed by secret dances and sacred rituals. Only thus does their world continue in a physical sense.'*

*'They have told me that it is the white man who is diseased from this lack of a spiritual foundation which makes them suffer due to our feverish delusions of a malignancy – God forbid – which is reflected in our civilisation. I cannot agree. Yet we have brought new forms of death to them through the introduction of foreign diseases. I tell them our mind through scientific inquiry and fervent prayers can cure them of not only our introduced sicknesses but also those that afflict them. They tell me it is their spirits who have done this and only the medicine men can cure them.'*

*'Yet I cannot help but ponder that we have shattered their sense of eternity. They do not accept the eternal ever lasting life of our Lord. Instead they point to the dying trees, the vanishing animals they need to hunt for sustenance and the invisible death which accompanies us. It is we who live in a state of non existence. They hold us in contempt, decrepit creatures – what blasphemy - which have invaded their land. They say we take everything and give nothing in return. We have introduced animal husbandry, crops, solid shelter and security from the ravages of nature. A barbaric nature they worship and hold through fear in esteem. They say they are starving in a land that provides plenty for all God's creatures. But I do believe their Dreamtime is fading like a mirage as we prey upon their land'.*

The professor put down the old sheathes of paper and looked up over his reading glasses at Martin who was fervently watching him. His shock of white hair a halo around his massive yet kind face. His generous blue eyes fixed themselves on his post graduate student.

“Quite remarkable coming from a man of his background in an age when the Christian faith was a paramount anchor in these Victorian times.”

“Yes. Seeing but not believing. Yet observant just the same.” Martin familiar with the notes he had assembled.

“We’ll see.” And Downing returned to the time worn papers.

*‘My companion here, west of the Napier Valley, struggling in this drought thinks less favourably of the country. Though he does not admit it he prefers it to the unchristian revelry of Port Jackson. Drunkenness, wantonness and most of the Evils of Sodom and Gomorrah which are not even frowned upon. I have my work cut out.’*

*‘My good friend the Parson I call him is sweating in his stuffy, heavy black frock. He accepts my humble lodgings in this dust bowl at the edge of Hell, the entrance to Dante’s Inferno. At times the Parson thinks this country is a nightmare where those lost souls, by which he means the natives or the Fallen from the slums of England can only survive in Perdition.’*

*‘The flies, the heat, the dust and dirt and the natives are nothing but the refuse of Lucifer sent by the dear Lord Almighty to test our strength in Him. Here is a heathen race who do nothing to help themselves who know nothing of our virtue of doing the Lord’s work or help themselves to the edifying influences of our Christian Civilisation. The parson thinks of them as the flotsam who had been expelled from the Garden of Eden*



*when Adam and Eve sinned against God. The sooner they accept the Grace of the Lord the sooner they could be saved from their savage existence. '*

*'Thus did my companion and friend the Parson speak to me many times of his Trials and Tribulations. I do agree the natives ore wretched idol worshipper for what occurred I am convinced that the Devil's minions are amongst us. For this was to be the last time I would see my friend tread this Path of Righteousness in this particular vale of Tears and Darkness. '*

“The Victorians were certainly given to ostentatious verbosity. Much of this is irrelevant I think Martin. Some severe editing will be necessary if you wish to include this document in your thesis.” Mark said crossing his legs and making himself comfortable behind his paper strewn desk. Around them the university was embalmed in an atmosphere of serious research, the corridors quiet, the noise of the city a distant hum. With the professor's permission Martin lit a cigarette, sipping the half cold cup of instant coffee Mark had proffered upon his entrance. Mark resumed his reading.

*'The Parson suddenly stopped walking. A loud rustle disturbing his perorations. In the distance we heard the strange cry of a bird underlined by the quiver of the hot summer breeze moving like the Ghosts of Purgatory through the strange bush. Something was in the breeze, something Foul and Unnatural. To my surprise the Parson patted his gun! I knew he had no great love for the Fallen Souls who, if they attacked him – driven by the Fiend – would meet the violence of the Lord's Wrath. The Parson believed well and truly by all that is Holy in the Vengeance of the Old Testament. '*

*'He cocked his gun in the rapidly waning light. This was not the gentle setting to sleep of nature but the invasion of morbid night at the Gates of Hell. Dark Malignant Spirits threatened to reveal themselves before our very eyes. We should pray to secure the survival of our Souls. For the moment I thought we had become lost, something that can happen to the most experienced bushman. But I heard the sweet gurgling of life saving waters near the junction of the creek and the river. I remember the Parson ejaculating a blasphemous expletive.'*

*'We stumbled over dark ruts and protruding rocks which we followed towards my humble dwelling. Eager to push on I saw the Parson as a mere Adumbration. He was the first to reach the river which was low at this spot. The bubbling brook reflected, behind the river pines the slightest shimmer of the half moon as it peered upon us from the branches overhead. The silence was complete.'*

*'Dear reader how can I rationally explain what happened next? Was it the Devil's Spawn we met, the Diabolical Attributes resurrected in this heathen race? The Parson was confronted by a dark figure. Both stood stock still. My body was shaken by an unnatural fear. My trembling lips frozen in complete terror unable to call upon our Saviour, my legs riveted to the ground. I was afraid! My heart pounded violently, I gasped for air. The Dark Man stood directly opposite the Parson who to me seemed to have no face. I tell myself it was the lack of light which led to this most singular perception. I was sweating as I saw the Parson fumble in his pocket for his gun. I wanted to cry out in desperation for no living blood to be spilt. At the same time I am sure I saw a manifestation of the Evil One.'*

*'I fervently prayed to God too weak to help my friend. There was a lightning flash as the two forms seemed to flow into each other. There was a burst of thunder – even*

*though it was a clear night with only wispy clouds scudding across the sickle of the Moon – followed by fractured flames from Hell turning the landscape into a blinding silver as the two of them – I could not tell who was who – became one. I remember the horrific scream, more animal than human. My senses swamped with the Devil's confusion. The lean Dark Man rose from the prostrate body on the ground. I feared the worst. There lay the body of my dear Parson, smoking pistol in his hand. With no pulse, with riveted open eyes I undid his apparel but could find no ingress of a bullet or of any instrument used in his most foul Murder. The Black Man must have been the Evil One for he had vanished.'*

Mark put down his reading glasses and handed the papers back to Martin. There was a studied silence in his office. A telephoned rang somewhere remaining unanswered as implied questions hung in the air between them. Martin wanted to say something but held back. Fingering the tiny pouch he had acquired which contained his quartz stone. Mark was looking into distant space.

"A most remarkable event. The parson could have died of fright." Mark reasoned. "His pistol could have misfired. It happens even now."

"You don't think there is something, ahm, unnatural about his death." Martin probed. He was on dangerous ground academically speaking.

"That is for you to prove. As for the tenuous connection of other disappearances in the valley, well, even that too, whilst tragic is something that still occurs today."

"Yes, granted. But in the Napier Valley these phenomena are statistically higher than in any other area I know of."

"To cut to the chase." A short smile from Mark. "You are trying to make a case that the aborigines have some sort of power over life and death, correct?"

“Well not just the aborigines. There are the Voodoo priests in Haiti. We read of magic being practiced in Africa, New Guinea. All, make that most primitive tribes harbour this preternatural power over human beings. When these potent individuals practicing the dark art are caught the punishment meted out is death. Their tribal laws are clear on this. That those who bend the laws of nature against life cannot be allowed to practice their dark arts.”

“That indeed is so. You are however postulating several things at once.” Holding up his fingers to elucidate his points.

Down the hall the phone started ringing and remained unanswered. Finally it stopped.

“One. Magic is practiced amongst the Pinja in the Napier Valley. Two. The magic is valid not just amongst their own kind. It also affects the whites. That is quite controversial.” Mark relaxed, amused by something. “Remember when some aborigines pointed the bone at Joe? Well he is still alive today. What I’m trying to bring to light is that this kind of thaumaturgy works only upon those who believe it. You will need more evidence. Disappearances do not necessarily equate to magic being practiced. Verification Martin is everything if you want to be taken seriously.”

“I know.” Martin conceded. “There was the anthropologist Homer followed by his assistant Neville who had some sort of breakdown. Prescott ended up under psychiatric care. And Colson of the local historical society mentions the untimely death of his predecessor Anderson.” Pausing momentarily then diving in at the deep end. “The locals there speak of the aborigines going back to their old ways. That is verifiable.”

“I am sure,” good natured, “this makes for fascinating reading. But as far as your thesis is concerned, all of the above can be explained rationally as I am sure you are

aware. Still it's gotta be said. For your sake and your reputation." And the universities Martin added mentally. "But let us assume for the moment, hypothetically of course that what you say has some validity. How will you fit that into your thesis?"

"Well professor the more I dig into this the more my original theme seems to change. I wanted to show the valley as a microcosm of pioneering Australia and the influence, if any, of the aborigines there. Even during the gold rush altercations were rare. And on a personal note they are fascinating. One man in particular, Jacko..." Martin stopped himself. Feeling strange.

"You've gone all white. Anything the matter? Another coffee? Glass of water?" Mark asked solicitously. Martin experiencing a flash back at what had happened at the Creek. A little dizzy, disoriented. He took a deep breath. The sudden heat irradiating him dissipated. Focus. Get back on track. The near panic attack passed.

"You state, correctly of course that this particular event is at best hearsay. What if I told you I saw something even more incredible?" There. He'd said it.

"How so?" this was getting interesting. Even if unrelated.

Another deep breath. The images all too real in what he had witnessed. Mark was the first person who he was going to relate this to. He told the professor of what had occurred. After the recitation the room seemed to have taken on an atmosphere of its own. It hung palpably over them. A storm waiting to break with fierce power. Over Martin.

"Shit 'ey?" Mark broke the tension. "I'll be..."

"Heavy duty."

Mark was considering something. “Write down what you just told me.” He said businesslike. “There is someone I must meet who may be interested in your testimony. This by the way has nothing to do with your thesis. Then again...we’ll see.”

“These occurrences are not so out of the ordinary professor. I remember Brian Ingliss documenting stuff like this from the distant past to the present. Can’t remember the name of the book.”

“Yes but before you get ahead of yourself the author wrote for the general public. PhD’s are something else. A different animal altogether.”

Martin was thinking how to make it fit. Unless he changed the whole theme of his work.

“You know Martin that you are delving into the paranormal. Not really within the paradigms of this department. Still if you can verify what you claim is occurring out there I may still support your thesis. But it will not be easy. Now where was I?” he asked himself as he rummaged through a desk drawer.

The distant phone rang again and this time was answered.

“You mentioned a third party.” Martin prompted.

“Oh yes.” Mark answered distractedly. “I have a colleague who works for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Roger somebody. Always forget his last name. It may well be that this Creek is of cultural significance. It may even have sacred objects embedded or left over there. It may well be a sacred site exercising power within the Pinja community. There is also another colleague of mine who specialises in aboriginal mythology. I think I shall speak to both of them. Might come in handy when it comes to your thesis being peer reviewed.” Sounding hopeful that this might just work.

“When?” Martin impatient. Excited.

“I’m coming to that.” He looked through his personal phone book and scribbled something down. “I’m going to contact them. Maybe we can meet together, the sooner the better.” Looking at his cold coffee. “If we can get preferably both of them to cooperate on this you may have a winner here. The PhD will need some revision as to its underlying orientation. Luckily it’s still early days. What we need is verification, lots of it. Let me talk to them first. I’ll try and arrange a meeting for us and if we can convince them of what you have just told me then we may be in business.” Energised.

“Thanks Professor Downing. I can’t tell you how delighted I am.”

“Let me keep your notes.” Martin duly handed them back. “I’ll get them photocopied then see me next week will you? My secretary will make an appointment for you. You know the drill.”

“Yes, thanks a lot.” Martin gushed.

“Well I guess this little meeting has been of some valuable profit.” Mark said as he consulted his watch. “Now I’ve got a lecture to give. See you next time.” Peremptorily dismissed. They must have run over time. Martin didn’t mind. This sounded good. Letting him run with this. Then thinking of Jacko again the butterflies returned, Martin feeling weak in the knees.

Dr Samuel Parry a reputable, reticent if unorthodox investigator of the enigmatic and the arcane had been a friend of Downing for many years. Upon gaining his PhD in anthropology he had promptly left Sydney University gleefully discarding a promising and what could have been in the eyes of his academic peers also a distinguished future in his chosen field. Being of independent means he care little about what others thought of his wasting his opportunities in his abandoned career.

As he had said to Mark many a time he was happy to leave behind the 'garbage expounded by inflated windbags hiding their supercilious inferences by conjuring up mountains of mystifying and meaningless waffle'. At first Mark had balked at this unfair judgement of his fellow workers but over time assented with less vociferousness for he knew Sam enjoyed pulling his leg even though he meant it.

His studies totally exclusive. Following his private indulgence since he considered himself a dilettante. It was understood between them when sharing any information pertaining to their common field of investigation that Mark would keep any delectable morsels of knowledge strictly to himself. Mark had no difficulty in accepting this for he knew that in the cloistered atmosphere of his workplace such information would be sidelined as being highly unsatisfactory. Sharing this exclusive bond with undisguised pleasure.

The taxi dropped Mark off at the ostentatious entrance of the 'Cecil Hotel' in the city. It was a gem of an anachronism of British defiance in the changing and fast moving world of the present. The liveried doorman opened the gleaming brass doors to the visitor who enjoyed the private peace and tranquillity of the upstairs lounge appointed like a Victorian club. Deep leather chairs, no bar, small ornately carved wooden tables, the smell of cigars and brandy pervaded the sumptuous atmosphere. Heavy velvet curtains of deep burgundy shut out the light of day in a discreet glow of wall lighting.

Sam rose to meet his guest as he was ushered by a waiter to a corner table. Sam ordered a 'Dortmunder Pale' for his visitor and a 'Glenfidich' no ice for himself. They shook hands as they proceeded to recline in the enveloping leather armchairs.

"Good to see you, got your message old boy." Sam beamed. Mark swore his handlebar moustache was growing horizontally like cat's whiskers. His ruddy face



beamed contentment, his eyes blazing with curiosity. The tweed jacketed finished off Sam's appearance of an English gentleman at leisure, which indeed he was.

"Kind of you to spare the time." Mark answered as the waiter poured the Dortmunder into a slender gold rimmed beer glass. A beautiful head rose majestically to the rim and no further. Sam took his generous double scotch and held it to one of the ornate wall lamps admitting its rich colour. He drained the last of his previous drink. Reclining comfortably he waited for his friend to start.

Mark was in no hurry. He offered Sam a good half corona and they both lit up, surrounded by satisfying aromatic smoke.

"Now what is afoot?"

Mark smiled taking a long draught of the rewarding lager.

"It has come to my attention that as you so put it, something is 'afoot'."

Sam merely raised an eyebrow. Deep blue eyes widening in delectable anticipation.

"One of my students has stumbled across an interesting phenomena at an outback town called 'Napier'. Apparently people have a habit of disappearing out there. At first he took no notice as in the last century this was a common occurrence for all sorts of reasons. But the trend is still continuing. And if they don't vanish off the face of the earth they experience severe mental traumas."

"You mean they go potty. I wish you would not use this cloned academic waffle to explain the obvious." He chided gently.

"Anyway as I was saying," Sam nodded his acquiescence, "the trend is, so my student believes, somehow connected to the medicine men of the local aboriginal tribe known as the 'Pinja'." He knew he had his friend's attention.

“After some preliminary research he found an old manuscript from his great great grandfather which records the strange death of a companion of his, a real fire and brimstone parson. This student was also witness to the physical destruction of two white men by what he considers to be an aboriginal shaman. The method most unusual.”

“By thunder.” Sam exclaimed then quickly turned around to hope no one had heard him. The stockbrokers who frequented the lounge were busy chasing paper fortunes oblivious to everything around them. The reason they both chose to meet here. “Go on.”

“He mentioned some researchers who ran into difficulties and the sudden demise of the deceased president of the local historical society. This student is of pioneering stock so the locals, some, have confided in him that the aborigines are returning to their old ways. Knowing your work in this field I thought it wise to consult you on this.” Having finished Mark took a breath before continuing to enjoy his cigar. Sam sipped his scotch thinking furiously.

“What do you intend to do?” Sam asked.

“Me? Well I said to my student that I would make some enquiries. In fact we have a colleague working in Aboriginal Affairs who collates sacred sites. Knows his stuff, not just a bureaucrat. Oh I nearly forgot. This student even had a vision in a cave. Classical. Saw a serpent. Then after it withdrew found a quartz stone. Claims it is a talisman which probably protected him when the two whitefellas were with that occult ceremony disposed of. Vaporised apparently. What do you make of that then, eh?”

“Indeed.” Sam said almost to himself. “Napier you said.”

“Yes.”

“Hm. What is the opinion of your student?”

“Off the record. He thinks either the place is haunted or the aborigines are reviving their Dreamtime spirits to gain lost lands and here it gets controversial to say the least, thaumaturgy is involved.”

“To say the least.” Sam repeated thoughtfully. “Anything else?”

“You want more?”

“It’s not much to go on. His great great grandfather’s testimony, one witness. Ditto your student with some dubious historical data. Best bet is to get your colleague at the department to go and have a look at the place. You know, a preliminary survey, see what he comes up with. I do not doubt what has occurred is real but all we have is hearsay evidence.”

“My thoughts exactly Sam. Are you interested?”

“My appetite has been somewhat wetted. You want me to sniff around?”

“Well I thought you might have something in that library of yours which can point us in the right direction. You know, the aboriginal history of the area, if there is any. Maybe it really is of special significance to them. Perhaps secret rites are performed there. It definitely has spiritual values for them.”

“You know that the secret of sorcery is primarily mental delusion or illusion if you wish.”

“I remember you mentioning it before.” Mark said as he finished his beer and called the waiter over. “Another?” Sam nodded. The waiter appeared silently as he glided over the thick woollen carpet. Within minutes he returned with their order. They cheered each other.

“There are people with psychic gifts if I may use that expression who have the power of projecting a mental image into their subject’s mind. What you see is what you

get so to speak. Reality is blotted out momentarily and what the practitioner wishes you to see you see. With me old boy?”

“Like the Indian rope trick?”

“Exactly.”

“I see.” Mark a little disappointed. “So all this is just a sophisticated form of illusion.”

“We cannot discount it.”

“And the vanishment of the two white men could be nothing more than a conjuring trick. Make someone think they were there when they were not.”

Sam merely nodded.

“What about the mythic snake in the cave?”

“Mental anticipation. It’s happened to me though more on a mundane plane. Like catching the wrong bus, certain the destination was what I wanted rather than where it really was going. Ended up in Bronte instead of Bondi.” Sam laughed.

“The men did actually disappear.”

“They could have shot through, who knows?” taking another sip and drawing on his cigar. “Mark it seems our positions are somewhat reversed here. Where is your academic scepticism?”

“Vanishing as fast as the beer it seems.”

“I can see that. My shout this time.” And Sam attracted the attention of a waiter who took Sam’s order. Back instantly. Service came at a price but well worth it.

Sam continued: “Your student is enclastered with his presupposition. Your peers would ruthlessly demolish any deviation of accepted theory. Even valid testimonies. This will have to be more than watertight. I for one am quite happy to accept what you have

told me. But I have no wish to go into the Outback for the moment. High summer. The place will be a furnace as you can well imagine.”

“I agree. So send my colleague with my student back for some more legwork.”

“That’s the general idea.” Sam satisfied he did not have to move.

“How’s your work coming along then?” Mark changing the conversation.

“The unpublishable manuscript. Yes, well...”

“No progress?”

“Plenty of that. Too much I think sometimes. Wouldn’t be interested in an editing job?”

“Unfortunately have my work cut out.”

“You know we should really collaborate on this.”

“‘The Gods of Atlantis’. I don’t know. The mention of that continent sends just about everybody running for cover. Tempting though it is. And my reputation, such as it is, just, would really go down the drain.”

“With your research abilities, my insights, my sources of information it could really rock the boat.”

“I’m afraid Sam the opposite would be more likely to happen.”

“What’s that?”

“Deafening silence.”

“You think so?”

“Does the name Velikovksy ring a bell?”

“One of my heroes.”

“You know then the difficulties he had even though he was proven right.”

Same held up his thick brawny hands. “I understand. Even though the challenge in itself would be worth it.”

“What if I write you an introduction?”

“Why not. Another round?”

“If you insist. But before I forget. After I have gotten in touch with our friend in the department, when we have more information, will you look into it?”

“I may.” Sam said mischievously.

## **Napier**

The sun set. The heat stifling. A weird oppression descended upon the silent bush. The air impregnated with a malignant intensity. Over tracts of open land a shadowy figure drifted silently through the sparse scrub. As he made his way to his secret destination the cicada’s noisy cacophony fell into subdued silence. The animal kingdom sensed the approach of something lethal, something inimical to life.

He moved with sanctified grace remembering when as a young man he had been initiated into the dark secrets of a renegade who had come to his tribe. Emerging

successfully from sacred rites embalmed in the Dreamtime. Knowing with certainty of having overcome the fear of death itself. The power coursed through him. Potent enough that the intervention by others of similar inclination could never be challenged.

Encompassed by an invidious aura of darkness the shaman moved with fixed determination into the realm of the Dreamtime spirits. He studied the heavens for the sun had set with the usual suddenness to see with his mind the conditions around him. Testing the elemental forces of recumbent spirits. Intending to expand his realm of death. He felt its approach in his bones. His spirit soaring with this unlimited force which could, when the sky opened, claim temporary possession of his soul and with his will bid it to do his deed.

Ascending into this fearsome domination he knew he would accomplish what he intended with an assiduity worthy of one of his especial creed. He continued onwards, brooking streams and gullies with unnatural ease. Surrounded by a mausoleum of silence. Always the first sign of the ingress by which he threatened to enthrall who was in his sight. Animals scampered away from the wandering necromancer who left no trace as he headed towards the ancient burial ground.

Aeons ago he had been granted a vision. The Ancient One, the Sky Father had come to him at this sacred site and revealed to him the majesty of his domain. Utterly different to the other Dreamtime spirits.

The Sky Father ruled in a magnificent citadel unlike anything he had seen. It was nothing like what the white man had built. The Sky Father had opened his spirit to an awesome revelation whereby he had become the messenger of His will. An audacious plan to prepare his people for the Ancient One's return. And for that to happen the earth had to be cleansed of all who would stand in his way. His people would also be able to

reclaim the land stolen from them. The whites would have to be expunged. He was happy to be of use if it meant the resurrection of the Dreamtime.

Jalngura his secret name waited for the heavens to announce His coming. Arriving he surveyed the sacred ground of his ancient ancestors lying cocooned in the infinite vastness of the Dreamtime. Soon these sleeping spirits would witness his awesome powers. With a calm mind and preternatural sharpness of perception he surveyed the gap slowly opening in the heavens over the western plain.

The darkness within the sky began as a tiny hole, growing gradually blotting out the stars. As the darkness grew in size the stars caught in this vortex spun in circles around its circumference. Where the leaden sky met the illimitable horizon the void yawned allowing the ingress of the One who had called him before. This divinity had once belonged on this ancient world enough to command the spirits of that distant world.

The abyss continued to open. The blackness expanded inexorably. Stygian light poured forth a pulsing darkness invading the vaulted infinitudes above. Broiling clouds absent during the glowering sunset now coiled down rapidly in a tempest of sinister splendour telling him the time had come to be ready. The serpentine mist descended twisting in a bizarre circling dance about him. Amongst this opaqueness he discerned a vague outline. The Ancient One resplendent in his sacred fane. Coiled in a vaporous exudence Zohex displayed his dominance as the misty cloudy serpent paid its damned obedience to him. If any soul coming to this dread place was to witness the strange occurrence they would have seen a milky putrescence cling twistingly over the ancient burial ground. The enthralling bestial abomination was as one now with Jalngura's dark self. Soon his endeavour would be accomplished. Such potent cogency's were available only to those ordained by Zohex, the Ancient One who was of a race physically long



vanished from a primordial past about to be reborn. And without a doubt Jalngura knew its will would be accomplished.

The severe face of Zohex held him in thrall. Surrounded by the stark austerity of his seat of power Jalngura had as yet never managed to penetrate into the realm of his benefactor. He had much to learn. Bare solid walls surrounded the supreme archimage. Tiny lights hung from a domed ceiling from whence the serpent poured forth through its masters volition. To Jalngura he was looking into a vast tunnel whose end was as close as his nose yet he knew it was also an endlessness beyond the realm of the stars.

The breath of the beast poured into him. Jalngura drank keenly of its esurient power. His spirit beheld the vast majesty of Zohex's realm deeper than the Dreamtime his people had ever known. His gaze transfixed upon dimensions no uninitiated mortal could ever attempt or claim to behold and not pay the price of its ultimate possession. To be in its eternal enslavement. After all he had been the catalyst of despatching the two white men still thrilled by that deed.

'I am pleased with what you have recently accomplished. You are making progress in the cleansing.' Zohex communicated to his neophyte. The serpent around them glowed sinisterly as the Ancient One spoke. The walls receded into the distance furthering the expansion into His alien dimensions.

'Soon the time will come for your people to reclaim what has been rightfully yours since the very beginning. There is much to be done but you are not alone. There are others on this earth who do my bidding. Together you shall all arise and possess that which has been taken from you, your power. I will redeem that which your people once possessed, the might of the Dreamtime.'

Jalngura stood stock still ensilenced in awe. The energy flowing through him made him light headed. His body a wisp like ghost. The levity creating a feeling of euphoria his soul now triumphant that the deed expected of him could be successfully accomplished.

An image of a white man appeared.

'Another dangerous enemy must be despatched. He knows of your secrets and must be destroyed, otherwise,' Zohex hissed, 'more of his kind will continue to annihilate what little you have left within you and your people. He already has stolen potent sacred object and will continue to do so. Therefore he must be stopped. Part of my powers are now yours to use for the great work. Step by step we will move towards the elimination of those who stand between you and your destiny. You will need an object of his to accomplish your deed.' And Zohex produced from nowhere a round golden circular object which Jalngura recognised as a watch.

'You know my will is your will. See that it is done and your reward will be to share the sweets of final victory with me.'

The serpentine clouds returned to the lights hanging behind the Sky Father. His visage flickered momentarily, the stars returned as the vortex receded back into the infinity from whence He had come. The stars reappeared as tranquil night resumed its mantle covering once more the sky.

Jalngura proceeded to cleanse the site chosen for his deadly deed. Banishing the spirits of the deceased who constantly clamoured for succour. With sedulous care he laid down his ancient implements adding to his array a man's golden wristwatch. With supine grace he lowered his body upon his chosen grave as remnant wisps of the cloudy serpent flowed through him sending him into deep trance. It was a sleep of death no living being

could accomplish. But as the Ancient One had revealed, soon there would be others to resurrect the past destroyed by the malignancy of the white man.

The image of his victim remained standing opaquely in front of him. The ophidian horror summoned from beyond embraced the white soul which had been forced to come whilst the body slept. The serpent encloaked him in a wavering lambency forming one vast thread uniting the inanimate soul with the titanic world of the Dreamtime.

Jalngura's spirit eyes saw the serpent begin to shape shift, a harbinger of something the shaman sought. A shocking emaciated human form coalesced from the steaming spirit snake indelibly stamped with the mephitic hue of death. A wan light glowered within, its semblance a corruption of glowing white. The ethereal likeness crumbled into a graveolent heap of irredeemable dissolution as the body ground to dust and annihilation spread its geomantic design before him.

What endured was the stark night with its lightless force. Jalngura's spirit welcomed the dangerous silence. The vision he sought had been granted and the presentiment vouchsafed would soon become a hideous reality for the one whom he now sought. The time had come to complete the last cleansing stage of the rite.

Rising from death's trance he began an eerie chant. Once more the bush held its breath, the animals silent as the sonorous voice wove a web of destruction around his victim's object. The sacred dance of extinction he tapped with the hypnotic beat of his two sacred bones. For these morbid instruments were themselves endowed with the Sky God's force of utter and inviolate destruction. The feat reached a murderous crescendo and the man of darkness threw one of the bones of power in the direction of his victim – towards Folley's Creek.

Roger Davidson was delighted to receive a call from Mark with whom he had studied for a semester. Would he meet a post grad student? Regarding what? A potential sacred site in the Napier Valley. Most certainly having done a quick check into the area. The Pinja's home ground. With the possibility of handing back more land once the discussions with the paper mill were completed.

Roger having completed his course in anthropology had left academia to take on a position as field officer with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He enjoyed the work of collating data of sacred sites never having been fully mapped. Where sites had been abandoned he tried to save from the ravages of nature and the indifference of the whites what he could. Sacred objects stored for both future research and more worthy to return them where possible to their rightful owners. Regarding the Napier Valley his superiors agreed the area was worth investigating.

In his Ford's utility Roger pulled into town just after sun down. He parked the dusty car behind the hotel Martin had recommended. They had spoken on the phone. A ramshackle brick fronted wooden pub. Classic country and a real fire trap. He was used to even less salubrious accommodation. And familiar in dealing with country folk. Regarding sacred sites he always trod carefully since farmers had no wish to relinquish land back to the aborigines. But times were changing. The last federal government had seen to that. The city behind the move to restore to the aborigines what had once been theirs. Now with large swathes of country in drought was an opportunity to buy back land even if reluctantly accepted by the current owners.

Roger strode into the scrawny bar of the 'Colonial' and ordered a schooner of VB. The heat was killing him. After hours of driving through parched fields, cattle and sheep huddled under a few trees the welcoming cool of the pub welcome. A few stray glances

were cast his way which he ignored. Locals downing well earned beers after a hard day's work in the relentless heat. After the barmaid had served him he asked her to verify his booking.

"Sure can do." She said pleasantly. Happy to have him in this off the beaten track town.

"Don't know how long, a few days at least." Almost apologising for the shortness of the duration. This was only a quick recce. The buxom woman pushed the register his way its pages wrinkled from sweaty hands or perspiring beer glasses.

He saw Martin's name one row above.

"Is Martin around?" might as well ask. Pub owners were full of local knowledge.

"You know him then?" trying to ascertain the connections.

"Aha. Went to uni together."

"So what brings ya here?"

"Catching up." No way was he going to reveal his real intentions.

"He's at a friend's place. His gear is still here."

One of her customers called out to her jovially not to gasbag with strange men. She moved off to the other end of the bar. Surrounded with old Namco stools straddling the serving area. The rough wooden floor littered with cigarette stubs. Above an old metal cast fly specked ceiling. The bar looked makeshift knocked together from leftovers of the timber mill no doubt. Behind on the shelf a choice of Bundy rum, cheap whiskey and not forgetting the ladies, sherry and gin.

Having served her customers the barmaid handed Roger a note.

"His friend's phone number. Said give 'im a call when you blow in. Phone's near the foyer."

Roger looked around with no luck.

“Near the loo. Stops people eavesdropping.” She said straightfaced.

Smile. “Thanks.”

Roger took his beer over and dialled the short number. A woman answered and Roger asked for Martin explaining why. She put the phone down and heard some kids screaming amongst themselves in the background. Domestic bliss. Martin picked up the receiver delight at Roger’s arrival. He was on his way.

The beer had bloated him. As it usually did. He ordered a bottle of Rhine Riesling getting a surprised look. Well he was from the city. Obvious now. She showed him a Seaview. He said it was a nice drop then after opening it plus a glass he walked into the lounge where the only other customers were two women gossiping amongst themselves.

After the heat the wine refreshed him. Exhilarating. Happy in his job rectifying the injustices done to the aborigines in times past. He mulled over what he knew about the Pinja. A bolt from the sky having created the Cradle, an ancient battle against a deity known as Bahloo. Classic stuff. Cosmic in essence. Gargantuan struggles between gods and humans. With local divergencies. Interesting area. Ancient memories.

A slap on his shoulder shook him out of his reverie.

“Roger good to see ya.”

“Martin,” Roger half turned, “been ages. Thanks for the message and your connection making this happen. My boss happy for me to have a crack at this.”

“Yep. Lucky break. But not here.”

“It’s the wine.” Roger beamed. “I think I’m slightly affected.”

“Let me introduce Mike. Old school friend.” Seeing a blond guy with short hair and mischievous blue eyes shake hands.

“So who’s shouting?” giving Martin the look.

“I’m right.” Roger indicating his bottle. “Have some.”

They both pulled a face.

“I’ll get a jug of beer.” Martin heading off into the bar. Mike sat pulling out a packet of cigarettes offering one to Roger who declined.

“Known Martin long?”

“Few years. Parted company when we finished our degrees.”

“You another one?” face dead pan.

“?” Refilling his glass.

“Headcases.” Roger puzzled. “Don’t worry I give Martin heaps.”

“Heaps of bullshit more likely.” Martin said as he placed the rich frothing jug of nice cold beer on the table. “Mike’ll never change. Doubt if he can. Too full of it.”  
Pouring out two schooners, admiring the colour of the cleansing brew. They cheered each other.

“So, sorry Mike, get the basics out the road, set for tomorrow?” Roger asked.

“Tomorrow’s fine.”

“Before I forget give us your number.”

“I haven’t picked up my key yet.”

“No worries. I think we’re the only ones staying. Bit of a scorcher `ey?”

For the rest of the evening they drank happy and content well past closing time.  
Roger finally stumbling into his fresh clean bed which he barely noticed, well under the weather.

Early next morning Roger took a cold shower to disperse the cobwebs crowding this thick skull. A heavy fog in his skull. Getting into his working gear he made his way past the empty bar and out into a very deserted main street. The heat palpable. So were the flies. He stretched the sleep out of his bones.

Strolling in no particular direction he asked the first local where he might get a decent bite. The older man looked at him with that natural ease so comforting in the people out west suggesting either the café up the road, a diner or just across the road the milk bar from where they stood. Roger felt like a dork, thanked him and crossed the road. He heard a solidary truck rattling into town.

Entering the café through the ever present squeaky fly screen door he found himself in an old art deco past still surviving if somewhat precariously until now. He made himself comfortable along the tables near the window. He could see the pub and Martin when he would turn up. They had drunk like fish last night with Roger barely remembering getting into bed. The hangover the reminder of a pleasant evening.

A middle aged woman waddled over. Plain yet pretty, floral dress slightly faded covered by a clean apron. Roger ordered the 'big brekkie' needing the sustenance. Along with a pot of tea. He was dehydrated as well. He had the dry horrors. A Telecom van stopped outside the pub. Mike talking then drove on. Roger waved and Martin ambled over into the milk bar.

"Ordered?" Martin asked.

"Yeah, waiting."

Martin looked around but the woman was in the kitchen.

"I think I'll have a hamburger with the lot. Good tucker. Good night hey?"

"I'm feeling my age." Roger feeling rotten. Burnt out.



“You? Old? Ha.”

“I see you brought a rucksack.”

“Well I was thinking we could camp out there. Make a night of it..”

“Who’s driving?”

“You are sunshine.”

The waitress returned with a huge plate. A large t-bone covered with bacon, two lamb chops, two snags, baked beans, two fried eggs even mashed potatoes, two slices of toast and a pot of tea. Roger was happy. Martin ordered his hamburger then chatted about things inconsequential. Roger eager to find out about the area, Martin telling him to wait until they were on their way. A while later, ages to Martin the huge hamburger arrived. They ate in silence relishing their food.

On their way Roger satisfied with the food felt content. Maybe the brooding silence of the area saturating the very air, or perhaps the heat made Roger not feel like talking. He had seen quite a lot of the Outback but somehow this area seemed impregnated with something Roger could not get a fix on. He blamed the grog.

Martin content to have a cigarette watching the yellow fields pass by. At ease.

They were sitting, tent up at the junction of Folley’s Creek and the Napier now little more than a trickle. The gums and river pines spread a welcoming shade over the warm smooth rocks. Lizards darted around them. But Roger felt listless, tired, indifferent. Blaming the heat even though he was used to it.

They had finished their packed lunch, drinking cold tea from a thermos flask. Martin with another cigarette. Roger's face flushed his black hair wet from perspiration. Feeling buggered. Probably due to last night's session.

"Well what d'ya think?" Martin carefully stubbing out his smoke.

"Your old farm? Miss it?"

"Oh that? No. I mean the site. Is it fair dinkum?"

"Bit early to tell. I understand from what you said coming this way that even though it's private property the aborigines are using it for their rites. Could be tricky. Some pastoral leases can allow for Commonwealth resumption. Reimbursing the owners, compensation. It could work if there are significant sites. Depends what I find. So why are you so interested?"

The question going right to the core. Martin lit another cigarette, then drank a little of the last of the cold tea. Thinking. What to say and how much. He'd known Roger during their undergraduate days but that was then, this is now. Would Roger comprehend the occult, the aborigines secret knowledge. It existed. It was real. He'd seen it in action.

"I believe," Martin being cautious, "this place has power." Let Roger make up his own mind.

"A cultural centre? Socialised sharing of common experiences uniting the tribe with their ancestors?"

"A bit prosaic. That too of course." Without expanding his ideas.

"What then?" Roger asked carefully, swishing the tea around his mug. "I mean," depreciating smile, "what sort of power. Their culture heroes, the living past, the Dreamtime? You mentioned a burial ground around here somewhere. Power has various connotations Martin."

“I know.” Not straying into the esoteric just yet.

“Did some research. The site of an ancient battle. The Moon god Bahloo defeated. Sort of. More like contained. The Sky worshipping Pinja won. Now their medicine men, or man, don’t know which side that’s on is, are definitely resurrecting their past.”

“If their culture is being revived, made live once more then my department will certainly look into a land claim. Finding artefacts, anything really the clincher. The burial ground helps.”

Martin rose took Roger’s and his mug to the stream, rinsing them.

“We’re trying to empower them.” Roger said at last.

“Exactly.” Sitting down once more. “The aborigines certainly think this place has some potent significance. Something only they can tap into.”

“That would be something. So you think this area is impregnated with the Dreamtime?”

“It appeals to my sense of mystery Roger. They certainly think so. This place is a cause which the aborigines feel as an effect. One they are building upon.”

Roger did not ask how Martin knew all this.

“To them it’s an objective reality.”

“So it has sacred significance. You got any direct evidence?”

Martin thought of his quartz stone. The vision, the destruction of Tom and Allen now presumed missing. The way the blackfella managed to traverse the countryside with such speed. He just realised that during all this he never feared for his safety. Maybe the quartz stone was some sort of amulet protecting him from bad juju.

“Put it this way Roger. I have stumbled across a ceremony.”

“Excellent.”

“There is also a cave up the valley, need a trail bike or horse to get there that may have been a gathering place. So how much clout you got?”

“I make recommendations if that’s what you mean. Then it goes up the bureaucratic ladder until it reaches the minister.”

“But he really only OK’s it, doesn’t he?”

“On the department’s recommendations, yes.”

“So it’s your boss then?”

“Well it’s not that simple. Us field officers do have some input. Sifting the evidence. What I need is for the elders to deal with me, get them to make their case. Then we back them. And the mountains of paperwork. All the government departments. But in short: where there is a viable tribe there is a good case for them to have land resumed for them. Then the lawyers take over.” A forced smile at the wrangling involved.

Martin nodded brushing a blowie away.

“If they been here continuously even better. Then there’d be artefacts most likely.”

“So could they get it back?”

“Well the department will have to make the Eagerton’s an offer once the preliminaries are out of the way. That’s me that is.”

“Well it’s something. So staying the night? Get a feel of the place. You know Roger,” remembering something Jacko had related, “there is an old medicine man somewhere ‘round here...dreaming.”

“Even better.” Roger was starting to feel positive. There was a good case here.

“D’you know where this burial site is?”

It hit Martin in a flash. The strange aborigine had headed out there after finishing off Tom and Allen, then vanished. He rose asking Roger to follow him. They walked up the hill behind them a bit.

“Alright. See those two gum trees on the other side that are sort of leaning away from each other?”

To Roger trees were trees. But he found the V shape Martin alluded to. And nodded.

“Veer to the right a bit. See the small barren hill? Some scrub there. That’s it. Wanna take a look? That’s what you’re here for correct?”

“Sure am Martin. This is fabulous.”

“Think you can find your way there?”

“Why, aren’t you...?”

Martin did not want to admit he was superstitious. After witnessing the demise Tom and Allen, even with his quartz stone he simply said he was too lazy to bother. Roger had his rucksack ready with his tools and water. It was not far.

“See ya in a jiffy. Won’t prod around too much. Unless something I can use to convince my boss this area is worth redeeming.”

“Redeeming, I like that.”

“See ya then. Oh, who’s cooking tonight?”

“I am.”

“Dead meat and boiled veggies?”

“Shit no. Something ethnic.” Martin laughed.

After Roger had splashed through the shallow waters making for the rise in the glaring sun Martin made himself comfortable with a cushion he had brought and opened

a book on particle physics. Its intrinsic premises literally mind boggling. Space warped and time bent. The very fabric of reality undetermined. Hope for the future.

In the shadows of the trees light relief from the searing sun. The camp fire now just glowing embers of wood and ash. After his head was spinning from the contents of his book he added some more twigs to the fire and boiled himself a cup of instant coffee. The silence total, an essence in itself, soothing, peaceful. After the coffee, back for some more mental manipulations of multi dimensional space Martin wondered where the occult mind fitted into the quantum universe, when he heard Roger splashing through the creek. Maybe the suddenness of his arrival but Roger seemed different without being able to put his finger on it. Maybe exhausted from the heat even though he had his hat on. Roger raising his arm languidly in acknowledgement.

“Cup of tea?” Martin asked cheerfully. Roger, listless merely nodded. “You buggered or something?”

With Roger closer as he plonked himself next to Martin and though fair skinned he looked emaciated. Immersed in an unhealthy aura.

“You OK?”

“I feel strange. Could be the heat.” Like someone under the weather. “Here I got something. Could be useful as evidence.”

“Yeah? What?”

From his kit bag Roger carefully extracted something delicate, handling it as if it were extremely fragile. Wrapped in an old clean tea towel Roger showed him what looked like a petrified human turd. Rock solid, streaky dark brown, wavering elongated lines along its horizontal axis.

“Should you have?” Martin concerned knowing that is was an object of importance to the aborigines.

“It’s primary evidence. It’s gotta get dated. Don’t worry it will be returned in due course. If it is ancient then the Pinja have a good chance for a land claim.”

Martin stared at the elongated object with no idea as to what it could be. Certainly not what it looked like. He repressed his urge to indulge in some anal humour.

“Could be a rhythm stick.” Roger volunteered. Martin agreed. He had never seen one, never seen any artefact ever.

“Was there another? I mean you can’t get a rhythm with just one now can ya?”

“No. Just that one.” Roger subdued.

“Well better get dinner ready. Tell ya what. Stuff the tea. Let’s open a bottle.”

The thought making him feel better. Roger merely nodded, preoccupied. His face even in the rich afternoon sun sallow, his eyes hollow. Maybe the light Martin thought. He is facing away from the sun. He went to the creek and retrieved a bottle of Wolf Blass, a Traminer letting the water run off the bottle.

Pouring the golden liquid into two plastic cups Roger downed half of it in one greedy gulp.

“You thirsty or what?”

Roger usually sipped his wine. Luckily he had brought four. Then busied himself with the meal. First build up the fire, preheat the deep pan, wait, drink, have a cigarette. Now the pan should be hot enough for the sliced sausages, a few lamb chops and sear them. More wine, Roger looked depleted, talking in mono-syllables. When the meat was done Martin added a can of red and baked beans, diced potatoes which he had cut up prior leaving, keeping them fresh in a small water filled container. The water also added

to the compot. Then some fresh chillies, salt, garlic, put the lid on and let it stew. Roger had watched all this but with little interest.

“The longer it cooks the better. So relax Roger, let me refill your cup. Did you bring any music?”

“What?” coming out of his reverie. “No.”

“Me neither. Ah well, sounds of rustling snakes instead I guess.” Pouring the last of the first bottle into his own mug. It went down well. So was the sun. Motes in the air. The last rays illuminating the distant ranges. Cool long shadows with kurrajongs doing their evenings noisy bird song. And the first mosquitoes. Martin got out the repellent and smeared his face, arms, hands and around the ankles just above the socks, then handed the tube to Roger. He seemed to be operating on auto.

“Need more wood?” Roger asked.

“Yeah, some.”

Martin checked his potpourri which was slowly starting to gel nicely. Time for another cigarette as he sipped his wine. Delicious. Roger returned with both arms full of driftwood. Twigs were lying all around them.

“Roger my friend. Go and get another bottle will ya? I’m feeling great.” Roger though seemed to slump as he retrieved another bottle. With Roger quiet Martin was content to watch the changing colours of the landscape. Some kookaburras were at it above them followed by others further away.

They ate their meal in silence forgetting the wine for the moment. The delicious succulent smell doing justice to Martin’s effort. Flies were extra but they came just the same. Well satisfied Martin moved back and leaned against a tree and lit his after dinner



smoke. He remained silent. Rather than ask Roger what bothered him, not that he cared that much he was instead waiting for Roger to spit it out. He didn't have to wait long.

"How dead are the dead." Roger wrestling with something. Martin felt the tension. Suppressed nervous energy constricting him. Roger had always been thoughtful but this was something entirely different.

"Depends." Martin keeping it light. "Sorry. Dead of course." Wondering where this was going to go. Well aware that the aborigines had their own ideas. Living spirit ancestors. The memory of that being all too clearly rearsen. "Why?"

Roger seemed stuck, lost for words. He gulped some wine. Martin followed suit. Plenty of time. The flies had gone with the sun going down. The crickets made a racket.

"This feels stupid," the flames turning Roger orange, "and you don't have to believe this but I felt an uncanny and no bullshit when I say this but a menacing presence lingering there observing me. But as you can guess there was nobody around. Just the vast emptiness which wasn't so empty. The place immersed in an absolute silence as if some heavy curtain had been drawn around me, and," rolling the mug in his hands, "this is even weirder but a paralysing dread came over me, seeping like a chill into my body. It felt heavy. I mean heavy. A mind numbing dread with a terrible presentiment. I was just rummaging around this pile of bark and stuff. Sort of half buried. Something underneath. I came face to face with an emaciated cadaver." Roger blurted out. "I freaked and fell over. My falling must have disturbed something and that is when this rock stick rolled out. The evidence I needed. So I took it. Temporary as I said. I mean this bloke was way beyond life. Not even recent. More bones than flesh. Strips of cloth sort of in an assumed direction all pointing one way, at an angle." Shaking his head. Finishing off his mug. Looking strung out. Martin offered him the bottle which he accepted gratefully.

“So I left putting the bark and twigs back over this skeleton. And now I feel in the back of my mind something wanting to possess a hold over me. Sort of trying to get in, gain control. I get this feeling if I sit here too long I’m gonna sink into the ground. That sort of heavy.” Rubbing his wrist. “Shit!” he suddenly exclaimed. “My gold watch, its gone. Must have lost it when I nearly fell over that thing.”

“You sure?”

“I think so.”

“We can go back tomorrow.”

Roger shuddered even though it was hot. “I am not going back there.”

“You want me to?”

“I shouldn’t ask. Still you know this area. Have you ever felt it?”

“What?”

“This dread.” Subdued.

“Can’t say I have Roger.” Even at the cave it was more fascination than trepidation. Roger looking fraught.

Roger felt himself to be labouring under a repellent primeval horror saturated with an enervating doom. Persistent. Not letting go. It, whatever it was was squatting gleefully upon him. The ‘white man’s burden’ a meaning all of its own.

Having gotten it off his chest Roger felt, along with the wine better for ridding himself of the horrible experience. Yet the stupor remained. Possessed by an inimical gloating suggestive and utterly abominable foreboding presaging a hell wrought perdition. The unwholesome verisimilitude and its attendant sense of merciless destruction impossible to shake. He felt trapped, as indeed he was.

During the night Roger left the campsite taking the strange elongated object with him.

A sensuous beguiling chant woke Roger from his alcoholic slumber. Sweet, insistent, its ruddy effulgence involuntarily guided him towards an enchanting if somewhat nebulous destination. A dulcet ambrosia poured through him which recalled a distant if half forgotten and now revitalised dream; a fecund revelation impregnated by a strange sibilant thralldom.

His prior sense of despairing foreboding had vanished. In its wake a fascination propelled him unto elder secrets pledged by this clarion call.

He drifted with unnatural speed over the dry barren ground. The night was a voluptuous embrace of olden fragrances coupled with romantic remembrances. It was a past, a glorious covenant resurrected by benign forces having taken hold of his soul. A captivation bordering on euphoria. Wild wonder enchained him as he approached that place which he had previously held in such dread fear.

Nature shrouded in expectant awe was witness to the dark psychopomp who prepared himself for the ancient rite. Tonight he would be as one with the powers of old, the powers of the Dreamtime which had created more than just this mundane reality.

Roger was drawn with transparent ease towards his mysterious goal. The oppressive dread which had plagued him so incessantly during the day suddenly returned. A violent and cataluminous desperation impelled him to escape this infernal horror which hungered for something he dared not assess. The alien ingress gripped him in its riveting clawing embrace.

The dark figure continued his terrible chant as Roger was drawn towards the prostrate cadaver. The putrescent obscenity reared up in front of him quickened by a sorcerous power not of this earth. Stricken by paralysis the primeval contagion embraced him. The disgusting carrion relic reared by the foulsome manipulation of the mantic arts pinned him to the ground as the dark figure loomed menacingly over him.

The stranger reached towards him with outstretched arms and open hands. Roger felt a soft gurgling squelching sensation as the black hand delved into him. Riveted by this diabolism which so pruriently invaded his cowering body he clearly felt the spongy resistance of his skin and organs as the man of death sought his desired object. Roger tried to flee this corruption which held him to the ground. The vituperative magician in a paroxysm of victory tore with disgusting glee Roger's bloody heart from his palpitating body.

In possession of the exanimate organ necessary for the feeding of the sacred snake the serpentine light lambently flared around the triumphant magus. Bathed in its stellar powers he returned with satisfaction to the time of his ancient ancestors. In his custody was the magic stick taken from his burial ground – so necessary to restore the spirits to this desecrated land. Thus he guaranteed a perennial guardian presence to protect the sacred from the greed of the profane.

The prostrate body of Roger Davidson lay in its own excreted waste. Flies swarming.

The coroner declining the need of an autopsy proclaimed a verdict of death by misadventure. His reasons were simple enough: there were no distinguishing or

suspicious marks upon the deceased. Except had he examined the body – violated by occult means – he would have discovered that where Roger's heart had been there now yawned a disturbing gaping cavity.

## **Nepal**

The Boeing 727 was approaching the Himalayan foothills making its approach into the Kathmandu Valley. On board Abbot Vajasama in deep thought. Barely taking in the rugged countryside below as the flight began its descent. Ears popping. The mystery of how a mandala could be a vehicle of actual transportation, like a gate had never been known to occur in the millennial history of both Buddhism and Hinduism. He strapped on his seat belt. The plane shuddered a little as the flaps extended out and down. To envelope a practitioner in its inner cosmic mantle created a frightening potential that

could have, as the two Lamas had indicated, catastrophic consequences. An instance of how deceptive the perceived tranquillity of reality really was.

He was sucking on a lolly the stewardess had suggested to ease the change of pressure in his ears. They still popped but the lemony flavour was nice. The flight relaxing though his mind was not. His equilibrium in turmoil. Perhaps even that was an indication of the changes manifesting themselves in the cosmic scale of things. A solution had to be found. The consequences alone too disturbing to pursue.

He took solace, the plane bounced a little, the ground coming closer, the tiny houses flitting by, in the fact that Sumtek Monastery had a unique history in crafting powerful mandalas. Inquiring minds had come from all over the sub-continent to study its mysteries. Ideally to centre the restless mind on the path to enlightenment. This particular mandala though was a path alright. A destination to the realms of hell.

The roar of the engines diverted his attention to the brown fields of autumn. The city out of view. The eternal jagged majesty of the Himalayas welcoming him. Solid. Steady. The sky a deep clear dazzling blue. Comforting even in what could be unusual times..

There were only a handful of tourists, business men and a few hippies on the flight from Delhi. Disembarking quickly down the extended stairs into the fresh air. The group gathering at customs, easily cleared, his passport stamped. Once outside the terminal the usual crowd of families, friends and cabdrivers made way for him. The driver from the monastery had easily spotted him in his saffron robe.

Driving the old Bedford along the tarmacked road straight through grassy pastures they soon had to contend with bullock carts, bicycle riders, noisy Tata trucks colourful as always and closer to the city pedestrians. The monk driving hooted continuously urging

the laconic to make way. Driving at a leisurely pace. They were now in the city if only because of the bedlam on the road. The human confusion reassuring of traditional habits with a timelessness unshakeable in its continuity.

The abbot decided to break the silence more to make the novice monk feel relaxed.

“I will call a general assembly tomorrow.” A flicker of recognition in his driver’s eyes. But remaining respectfully silent.

“The topic of discussion the nature of the mandala. I will announce it this evening so all can ponder the subject.” He needed divergent ideas, convergent solutions.

“With respect,” the monk ventured concentrating on weaving through the traffic as they reached the outskirts, mansions built behind tall walls, “is there any particularities you wish clarified?”

The abbot smiled. “You are aware no doubt of what recently occurred. We have been witness to something phenomenal in the history of the monastery. My first concern is that those of less clearer minds might wish to interpret this as a miracle of the Buddha. This unusual event was an act deliberately planned. It was not fortuitous of that I am sure.”

“Deliberate?” the monk picking up the gist of the abbot’s comment.

“Perhaps.” Not to sure. Disquietening certainly. He was still coming to grips with this, what? Occult? A deity reaching through into the supplicant from one of the realms of hell itself? He was prepared for the worst. A potential ingress of psychic forces which could actually materialise this side of reality. The black mandala predated the monastery. He wondered if the supplicant had intentionally approached the now collapses statue then

taken the black mandala. That version of events he preferred to the only other explanation. That the supplicant had crossed over. It would be a neater explanation.

“Maybe a demon was waiting for the right mind to reveal its secrets or worse...”

“Go on.” The abbot interested. They drove slowly around a stray cow.

“...doing its will. Possession.”

“There are many who are that already, except they do not know of their state. But I see your point. One who wanted this. To instil the powers of Hell into himself. Maybe even use the demon as a guide. Which begs the question, being guided to what?”

“I am glad I am only a humble novice.” His driver laughed.

The general assembly had not resolved the problem to the abbot’s satisfaction. But then as he retired to his simple austere cell the meeting had revealed the diverse nature of the human mind.

He decided to ponder in the dark. Solitude. What they all knew was that a mandala is the foundation of the original motionless surface of consciousness. Entering its vast domain freed the mind of karma. Like having one’s brain scrubbed. Then, cleansed and with mindful concentration go from the inner void of the mandala to the world of the Buddha gods. Ideally the inner eternity circumscribed by time itself the void was a vehicle to bring forth the archetypal potentialities who by the adaptation of space could then construct for their own journey their own mandala. That mandala became a reconstruction of the practitioner’s own inner cosmos.

Filled with potent realms. Either the demon who had come across or the practitioner had to pass the barrier of the Mountains of Fire to burn away accrued ignorance. The Graveyard of Death mimicking the power of the unconscious. Not



forgetting the various realms, some shimmering like Paradise where the concept of the self was annihilated to reveal the true essence of oneself. Not there. Only then could one pass through the final gate which lead to the centre, the void. It was here that demons, usually the confused indistinct mass of the outer mind had to, through these demons annihilate consciousness, the supreme final barrier. Then one could enter the Diamond Seat of the Buddha existing outside time and space itself.

In an ideal world. One a demon had made successfully to invade the practitioner. Has name now irrelevant. He was something else. The black mandala obviously not there for enlightenment. On the outside its construction deceptive, within, oh within, what churning diabolical potencies peopled its cosmically linked realms. A gate not just to the demon world but a cosmic dominated demon world. One that might have been gestating for millennia. Now ready to put their designs upon this world.

He mediated on his breath to clear his mind prior retiring. Ah if only the illusions of the waking mind could recede as easily as that of the demon realms reaching with consummate ease into this world. The next question was of course: what would this entity want? Pure power for its own sake? Or was Anithama the one in control? A demon in human form.

The next day, whilst in his office, Bahnum Randa came to see Vajasama. He bowed in traditional Nepalese, greeting, hands together and was offered a rickety chair. Around scrolls, parchments, books littered the abbot's organised desk. The musty smell of the written word permeated the air. The man was young, maybe twenty. Short stature as were many Nepalese, dark brown eyes, brown skin, smooth short black hair.

“Your holiness. I have been thinking.” The novice began tentatively. The abbot smiled encouragingly.

“Regarding last evening about the mandala in Adibuddha’s sanctuary. The mandala has reappeared. Or it is another one. I cannot tell.”

The abbot’s eyes grew wide in astonishment. “Amazing to say the least. Well, well, well.” He shook his head in wonderment. Were there two or had the black mandala returned of its own accord. Or as Bahnum ventured, a monk perhaps having replaced it with a copy. Still a mandala was a mandala. Before getting his thoughts together Bahnum continued:

“I would like to unravel the mystery directly.” Certainty in his demeanour.

“Directly?”

“Fathom the mandala.”

“Why? Or precisely how?”

“Adibuddha may have entered its realm. If I follow him I might be able to find out what is going on and try and bring him back.”

“Why do you wish to do that? Curiosity?”

“That included. You see your holiness before I was accepted here I had lived a different life.”

“Indeed.”

“You see I belong to the Tamang on my mother’s side. My father is a Bombo.”

“I see, a shaman.” Interesting.

“Naturally I was initiated. I originally came here to clear my mind before continuing the old tradition. Buddhism has helped me a lot. At first, prior coming here I had not thought that that vocation was for me. Unsure about the induced states a Bombo

experiences. But I persisted right unto madness. I even feared for my sanity. Thus my being a novice here. Still when I return home I continued my studies. With due respect I think I have the gift to be a Bombo.”

“So you are an initiate.”

“Yes your holiness. I have had in my possession spirits. The Bombo liken them to gods. The aim is be master of these apparitions. I underwent the final initiation when I was sixteen. I started early. The place chosen was a cemetery. I went through Hell and survived. I saw threatening corpses,” he rattled off easily, “decayed beings with lurid burning fires enshrouding them. They engulfed me, set me on fire during the initiation which once accepting them as apparitions to control them, they vanished. I have no fear of them.” He said without pride in his achievement.

Vajasama was glad this young man had survived the demonic onslaught.

“At the time I thought I had a lucky escape and decided if I wished to further myself I had better understand the mind as precondition to continue. And here you teach the nature of the mandala. Its deities almost comforting by comparison.” A hint of a smile. “I feel I can be of some service regarding Adibuddhas disappearance.”

“Is it worth it?” The abbot urging caution. Comprehending that if Adibuddha was indeed on the other side then this young man could very well try and follow him. Save him if need be. Unlock the mystery of why a particular demon was now active having maybe even set in motion to expand his realm into their reality. He was ready to listen to the young man.

“In the Tamang tradition we are taught that the more one is entranced the more one gains control over the trance state. Achieved also through dreams. And whilst I have not pursued this path here preferring the Middle Way I have kept indirectly to the path of

the Bombo through my dreams. An admission I am afraid of not being a good Buddhist. For you see my dreams are mapping out a path for me. I have not chosen these dreams, they have chosen me.”

“I see. So what is this proposition then?” thinking of his conversation in Kashmir. That the Middle Way might not be the way to obviate what was coming to pass if nothing was done. Worse that the Middle Way itself was under threat if the ingress continued. But whosoever challenged this assault would suffer karmic retribution. A great sacrifice in combating this demonic infusion. Perhaps the demon knew of this as well. Or the intelligence behind it.

“If Adibuddha is trapped I would like to liberate him from whatever possesses him.”

“And you think, given your training you have the strength?” the abbot asked cautiously. A soul was at stake here. He had no wish to stop Bahnum given the circumstances. It was surprising the way Bahnum offered himself as a possible solution. The timing perfect. Maybe Bahnum was under the protection or guise of a lesser Buddha.

“How long do you need to prepare yourself? Are there any special requirements?”

Bahnum bowed in thanks.

“Normally purification rites have to be followed. But I hope I have been purifying myself here since the day I entered as a novice. I do not claim to have fully succeeded but I think I am ready. The timing is right. I hope.” A hint of a smile.

The abbot thought about this. The sun illumining dust motes. Bahnum was eager, he felt it. Calm at the same time. A good sign.

“As you alluded to, this particular mandala is more than what we create here in general. It is ancient. It is a gateway linking two worlds. Whether the realm which has

invaded this reality is only in the mind or within our reality now I cannot say. However there must be a reason for this occurrence. I am indeed grateful in what you suggest. You realise of course you are on your own in the end. If you do go, let me assure you I will seek the blessings of all the Buddhas, past, present and future ones. I will convene a special prayer meeting for all to attend when the time comes for you to enter into its dangerous realm. My blessings and my thoughts, such as they are, are with you. When you think you are ready to begin the task which I hope you have freely chosen, come and see me.”

“I am ready your holiness.” Bahnum said with circumspect sincerity.

“I feel the energy within you ready to burst out. Allow me to give you some advice. Try to focus that energy first within yourself. You have no idea what may occur this side or that side. If anything will occur at all. By focussing upon your inner surge of energy you will have a better chance of survival. The secret is stamina and for that the pace is just as important as the orientation and the goal. Use your inner energy in the same way as one climbs a mountain. Steadily. For if the mandala does open you might find yourself so far in that you have gone too far to find the way out.”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Meditate upon what you intend to achieve and how you wish to achieve it. Then come and see me.”

### **Varanasi, India**

Rana Surat, a tubby man in his early forties had difficulty in suppressing his exhilaration. Brimming with confidence he kept looking as he drove towards his wife who held the black velvet ceremonial case. Within lay the sacrificial knife endowed with magically charged jewels. The knife had been handed down to him by his father once a political officer serving in the North West Frontier Province, having received it from a grateful tribal head there.

Savarna, her gaze as steady as a rock looked straight ahead of her as she silently recited potent mantras. She was not distracted by Rana's continual use of the car horn as he veered through the endless teeming human masses which crowded the streets of the old city. The aromas of perfumes and exotic oils mingled with the pungent smells of various curries blending into a heady mix. Added to this was the incessant stench of rancid cow dung moistened continually with fresh urine gushed forth by the countless cows roaming freely in the holy city. Their presence as eternal as the hundreds of temples, ghats and pilgrims who came to this magnetic centre of worship. Hoping to gain salvation by bathing in the ever present Ganges.

Savarna and Rana were both devotees of the black arts. She a follower of Kali whilst Rana preferred the cosmic dimensions residing in Vishnu. Yet strangely enough

Rana became increasingly convinced that Kali had chosen him to engage upon a quest in search of a knowledge so ancient even the sages of India only dimly remembered this long distant resonant lore.

In fact Rana reasoned what it pertained to was hidden from wrong thinking, wrong reasoning, western reasoning. Though trained as a political scientist he was also a Hindu only too aware of the changing Winds of Maya currently flowing through this world and indeed this age of Kali Yuga in general. Even more so he was proud of himself that he and his faithful wife still accessed through the living gods a past that India had never severed.

This evening the astrological conjunctions were favourable coming into a potent nefarious zenith whence they could unlock the deep hidden powers of Kali's wisdom. With the help of Vishnu, the god of creation and destruction, the goddess in black would grant them their humble ambition: to gain the key with which to master the vital forces regulating the ambiguous elements of the heavens that influence the lesser powers on earth.

For Rana there was a reason and a method to this quest. The rise of India's civilisation had begun with the invading Aryans and it was they who had brought the cosmic dimensions to an otherwise earth centred populace.

After penitent fasting Rana was certain his wish would be granted. Aiming at nothing other than to gather about him Vishnu's own stupendous powers which with the help of Kali would draw forth the essence of the gods themselves.

The shouts of rickshaw drivers, the jingling bells of hundreds of bicycle riders, the derelict cars and meandering buses, the bright lights of the bazaar in evening's

twilight accompanied with the celebratory music of Varanasi's temples were soon behind them.

"Oh Vishnu," Rana prayed aloud, "answer me tonight and reveal to me the power you bestow upon your faithful servant."

A sudden pothole brought out a rather mundane curse from his thick sensuous lips. Savarna silhouetted in darkness stared straight ahead shrouded in recumbent silence. He looked at his wife, her ambivalent serenity a rock of devotional certainty.

He silently chuckled. He was thinking of his academic comrades, so wise to the ways of the west. But all they were doing was to bask in their superficial empty headed verbiage which passed for intellectual knowledge. They would never know with what powers he would impregnate his soul. Soon, very soon he would be master of his own karma and escape the chains of Maya thus penetrating her veil. That was only the beginning to the great work he had mapped out for himself.

Rana was typical of the paradox confronting the middle classes. Painfully aware of his country's and his culture's social shortcomings starting with the humiliating invasion by the Moghuls, then followed by the cynical manipulations of his people by the British Raj which had served to sharpen the dichotomy between the people. Still he was fascinated by the meteoric rise of the European powers. But at the same time there smouldered a despising hatred for their vacuous cupidity. And still they conquered the world. Yet their power had proven a sham, held barely together by the artificial threads of technology. The hallucinogenic breath of Maya, fragile as a rose petal. The gods would awaken. One simply needed the right key, the right mantra or mandala to open the ancient realms. And tonight Shiva, Vishnu or Kali would grant him his wish. He would



be blessed by the ultra telluric dimensions of the gods come to resurrect his genesis. To become the centre of creation.

Was there not the Ultimate Night in which all lay concealed? Did it not exist without Form suspended in endless infinity? In the Songs of Creation even the most holy and divine sages had been a later manifestation within the great Cosmic Wheel in which this vast universe eternally oscillated - flowing from nothingness to actualisation and back to nothingness again. It was all one long vast Brahmic Age of Dreams. Tonight then the Veil would be rent and their glory drench his potent self actualisation. Becoming one with the gods. Unrivalled in unparalleled glory.

Savarna remained silent.

They drove across the large double tiered iron girdered bridge spanning the Ganges. There was little traffic. The peasants of the surrounding villages had returned from the markets sitting around their hearths enjoying their evening meal. The old Bedford rattled along the now familiar country lane. Dusty and bumpy surrounded by low shrubs and struggling stunted trees near the embankment of the slow moving river. Rana taken by the sparkling reflection of the city's lights. Dancing celestial lanterns, reflecting their own mysteries upon the serene waters.

He kept his excited emotions in check. Rana marvelled at his own audacity in aiming to storm the vaults of heaven. Nervous with anticipation he also found himself incredibly at peace. He had purified himself according to the holy rites. He had fasted and prayed to Kali, to Shiva and Vishnu abstaining from improper thoughts and deeds. Concentrating on the task ahead. Rana stopped the car.

They were at a small clearing from whence a narrow path vanished into the dark twisted woods. Changing into their ceremonial black linen garments Savarna took the

sacrificial knife from the black velvet case. The silver blade glowed eerily in the gloom of the forest. The wind rustling secrets around them.

They had indeed been lucky to find these ancient underground storehouses once the treasure chambers of Maharajas and other rich merchants. Built at the time of the Moghul invasions they were now abandoned and forgotten. Here in this desolation they practiced their rites amongst the brooding silence of forgotten centuries.

Rana remembered not so long ago when Savarna serving as his scribe had uttered alien ululations during an invocation to Kali which at first had sent a chilling premonition down his spine. She too remembered the vision. On that night a strange fire had flared in front of the bloodied altar still warm from the sacrificed she goat. They had seen not Kali but Ravana who bathed in a ghastly blue aura revealed himself as the fierce scourge and enemy of mankind.

In his unearthly hue of icy light and accompanied by winds of frosty coldness Rana had trembled. Babbling prayers of atonement as he was haunted by the nightmarish and fiendish wanderings of Ravana's distorted mind. The god had shape shifted into an ancient archimage, a conqueror of a vast realm lost in the midst of time. He had demanded obsequence to a dark power from beyond the stars something to which Rana had easily succumbed.

Groveling in the turmoil of insane despair, strung to breaking point to preserve both his life and his mind it was Savarna who had come to the rescue. Calm in her heart she invoked Kali screaming her name by painful offerings of her own blood thus assuaging the inane prattle of the mad god Ravana. Rana had by then collapsed in a swoon and thus it was Savarna who had felt the fire of Kali stirring in her bosom. Wrapped in a blazing scourge of dark luminosity.

She knew how Kali surrounded by the corpses of her enemies, dismembered them. Sympathetic to Savarna Kali banished the mad god. But as in all things when dealing with the gods there was a price, an unbeknown promise of which Savarna never spoke saying it had been a vow to the goddess made in solemn secrecy.

Upon reflection Savarna had been surprised at how quickly Kali agreed to the bargain offered her. Savarna was granted the mantle of protection from and against the Winds of Maya and what that hid – the Abyss which as always had to be crossed in the end.

The consequence to accomplish this ingress was the life of her husband. For Rana was a pretentious pig. He loved the esoteric indulgence more than herself. She was merely his servant, then his mother and finally an unwilling destitute concubine. His lovemaking he fulfilled with the ingenuity of a rooster. Having gained the entrance to the threshold of the Abyss his life would then be forfeit and he would become at Kali's bidding another garland upon her wasted hideousness. This had pleased the goddess.

Later Rana upon awakening from the shocking revelation found his wife unconscious on the floor bleeding from her abdomen. Luckily the flesh wound was not deep, merely a gash across the top layers of skin. He closed his eyes still shuddering at the close escape they had encountered on that dreadful night.

It was only later he discerned a difference in Savarna's eyes. Glittering with an icy impregnation. They had not changed since then. She herself grew silent as if a mighty bourn now enchained her heart and soul. Savarna though reassured of Kali's protection stayed faithful to the goddess. With sanguine presumption Rana felt completely assured of his own success.

Treading lightly over protruding roots they made their way past the gnarled bent trees of the abandoned forest. At the lichen covered entrance a stifling silence reached out to them. They followed the main passage fallen into disrepair ignoring others which were mere blinds to confuse and waylay the thief and plunderer. The bleating of the goat they brought the previous night indicated they were at their own private and secret temple. They began the necessary preparations.

Thick sweet incense clouded the musty chamber. They placed five candles at the apexes of the pentagram underlining the base of the life sized statue of Kali. Already her skin was moistened from infusing necrotic offerings. Her red eyes smiling to the beckoning supplicants. She had two hands outstretched awaiting her due. Frozen in her dance of bodies whose mangled semblances of once having been human appeared to float on a sea of blood flowing to the edge of the world. The power of the imagery of the goddess potent realities to her servants. Her necklace of human skulls stolen from Christian and Muslim graveyards. Her garlands of human hands the only form of covering draped around her black waist. With her two other arms she held a menacing sword blackened with blood whilst her fourth arm held a severed skull. Tied to the statue was the sacrificial goat.

Savarna and Rana assumed their lotus positions in front of the goddess. Performing initial prayers Savarna then rose gracefully towards Kali. Covered only in the sacred vestments Rana could not but help thinking of the slim, lithesome body of his wife. He saw her delectable feet ringed with rich ankle jewellery having to forcibly remind himself to pay obsecence to Kali. They lit the five candles so as to banish any unwanted spirits. Rana assumed his position at the centre of the pentagram whilst Savarna approached the altar and the now struggling goat. Around them the candles cast

their flickering light about throwing up swirling shapes and ambiguous shadows. Savarna lit more incense to please Kali and taking the ceremonial dagger affirmed her prayer.

“Kali, Kali, hail Devi.” the flowing lights diffused by the smouldering incense, “goddess of thunder, iron sceptred goddess,” breathing deeply, rhythmically she lifted the dagger above the frantically struggling goat’s exposed neck. Her voice now filled with wrath she intoned more fiercely: “Kali, Kali oh horrid toothed goddess,” she exclaimed in piercing cadences metamorphosing Rana into submission, “Eat, cut, destroy all the malignant and cut with this knife, to bind, to bind,” she screamed trembling wildly in front of the shadowy altar. “Seize, seize, drink the blood, drink the blood,” And the dagger flashed into the bezerked goat’s neck. Its life expired in one last bleating protest. The blood gushed into the sacrificial bowl splashing liberally onto the floor, a black warm sea congealing about the goddess.

Savarna picked up the receptacle and swaying from the incantation of the chant drank greedily its warm contents. Then in dark guttural tones continued: “Salutations to Kali. Kali salutations to Kali.” Taking the bowl once again from beneath the goats bleeding neck. Still spurting the life fluid she drew a circle around the altar. Then facing the goddess cried “Jai, jai, tara.” Within the flickering lights of the pentagram.

She beheld a blurred spectre moving amongst the shadows, its presence announced by its pestilential hue. Savarna prayed to Kali the Eternal, Kali the Fiery, Kali the Destroyer, Kali who united all in her embrace. As the rapture mounted Rana felt himself sweating profusely as Savarna’s chant continued. The ghostly semblance flitted about them. Rama oblivious to all as he concentrated upon crossing the great abyss. But it was not to be. Not yet.

The disturbing presence hovered over the statue silently invading it. The eddying smoke of the incense formed about the adumbration. She thought that within the figure she saw a mountain. And then it struck her - that there was the gate to the Abyss, the mantle of Maya. In that ebon fane a black mandala appeared wrought out of some adamite material engraven with bizarre glyphs.

Kali was revealing through this other presence signs vaguely familiar. Yet decidedly alien in import. Amongst the opening a temple within and a human form she did not recognise. Its sinister presence chilled her. The evil positively pouring out towards her. She wanted to remove the malevolent image yet neither did she dare to disbelieve the vision granted by Kali. A cold wind blew in from behind her dispersing the thick clinging smoke from the fuming incense. In the feeble light of the candles Savarna saw once more the familiar form of Kali, sombre, no longer liquescent but solid.

Dimly illumed wafting smoke rose in curls towards the blackened ceiling. Savarna was busy banishing the ghostly form from the sacred pentacle, returning it to its own world. Satisfied all was clear she bowed once more to Kali. The goat lay stiff in front of them.

Rana spoke in slurred intonations. "Savarna, I had a dream. Shiva appeared in a mountain calling me."

Savarna watched Rana wondering if this was indeed a sign sought from the goddess. The signal and sacrifice with which to accomplish her own dark deed.

"It must be a beneficent sign." She pleasantly agreed. Rana deeply satisfied bowed his thanks to Kali.

'Yes you were given a vision for I too saw a mountain and something else. A tablet engraven with strange signs. The temple I believe is hidden in that mountain we

were vouchsafed. It might be a potent god residing there. Waiting to guide us to our destination.”

Rana’s eyes widened in fevered anticipation. He was speechless from inner joy bursting within him. All he could say was that he had to be the guide in this quest.

“Yes.” She hissed more than whispered.

They buried the goat.

Rana, unlike Savarna was exhausted, emotionally drained. The exhilaration of the revelation had worn off leaving a feeling of intense inner numbness. They drove back in contemplation, each wrapped in their own private thoughts. Savarna was as silent as ever. Her calm attitude in this work gave him strength. Not that he doubted himself to see this through. Yet his emotions were always rocketed into a tumultuous roller coaster ride and it took some time for him to regain his equilibrium.

They returned to a city asleep. There were still the lights of the ghats and the temples. Some shopkeepers were on their way home but the streets in general were deserted. Even the cows had miraculously vanished.

Their flat on the western end of the city overlooked the Ganges and the forest where they had just been, so innocent and mundane. It pleased him immensely that amongst the shrubs and twisted stunted trees lay a secret place which was an opening to a past so vast that even Rana was still tickled pink that it was they who had found it and it was they who now possessed it.

The vision clung to his mind like gossamer wisps, tenuously persistent. It reminded him of something his father once brought up when he had returned for the last time from the North West Frontier Province. That was thirty years ago and after the

partition they had returned only once. The Pakistanis had changed overnight. Upon gaining their hard won freedom from the British and the Anglo-Indians they welcomed them back as brothers not as implacable enemies. His father had taken Rana with him but as a boy he only remembered the stark mountains reaching for the deep blue sky. Their unique colours would always remain in his memory.

After his death Rana inherited the library. It had taken nearly a year to sort out the volumes of material his father had accumulated in his lifetime. His thirst for the history of the place prodigious. Much of it concerned military exploits against the Pathans who more often than not were the winners in their many collective skirmishes. But as a political officer he had the advantage of seeing their historic struggle in a more objective light. For beneath all the turmoil of this clash of empires, this end of the 'Great Game' there ran a substratum of events which had never really seen the light of day.

The area historically always at the cross roads of the great cultures of their day. Aryans, Greeks, Mongols, Buddhists, Moghuls, Turkmen, Russians and finally the British all left their testimony in the sands of time. Their belief systems accompanied their spirit of adventure. Swat for example had been a Buddhist centre of learning only to be destroyed by the sword of Islam. The contents of their libraries were scattered to the four winds. Yet with the diligence of a serious historian Rana's father unearthed many ancient manuscripts. Some were undecipherable written in lost tongues and long dead languages. Others he translated though Rana at the time was busy gaining his MA in political science. After that he had obtained a position as assistant lecturer at Benares University which kept him busy for the first two years. Formulating his course was work. There had been little time for any other research.



Then he met Savarna. A fiery independent honours student in ancient history. Their love affair was as fervent as her character. She a woman of the twentieth century was not going to be subdued by any man. Rana unlike his contemporaries did not mind. The struggle between the sexes bored him and so Savarna and he were soon married. What surprised both their parents was that neither of them had any real desire to start a family. The bond between them was thus further strengthened.

Savarna opened to him the aeons of time that history concerned itself with. Rana was instead immersed with contemporary social and political problems. Yet Savarna made him aware that the wheels of destiny shaping the future of nations and empires were not governed by sociological and economic laws, mere rationalisations in her eyes but by psychological ones. And these in turn depended upon the state of mind of the individual. India's greatness declined because the psychological power of the Moghuls and then the British had been far more potent thus dissipating the energy of their own culture. Resurrect that energy and destiny would once more favour them.

Their bond continued to strengthen. Rana was absolutely fascinated by his wife. This woman was a rarity indeed. His friends laughed behind his back calling him a weakling. Rana did not care. She was good in bed. He saw in Savarna a strength he envied. When he inherited his father's library it was Savarna who collated most of the material making a discovery that was to change their lives, forever.

They were one day sitting in a tea shop near one of the ghats on the Ganges. Rana still remembered that clear sunny day in spring. Between monsoons the air was fresh and crisp. They had money so life was pleasant. They felt free with each other and with their

jobs. Savarna was a part time tutor even though she did not earn as much as he. But there was enough to be happy and content with.

They watched the bazaar, the people, the shouts and laughter, the rickshaws, the gawking American tourists coming timidly out of their air conditioned buses. Rana finished his crumbly milk biscuits and ordered some more. Savarna had not touched hers.

“I’ve found some interesting papers in your father’s library.” She said quietly. Rana bristled at this. He felt possessive in regard to his father’s work. He knew he had not the time to sort it all out but somehow Savarna digging around violated the pristine joy of discovery which he wished to keep for himself. Only then would he share it with her. But he said nothing. After all she was only helping him. He gestured with a nod of his head for her to continue.

“What do you know about the Sumerians?”

“That they’re dead.” He quipped. The second plate of biscuits arrived. He took one, then another. Delicious.

“No. Seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well you know much of the Jewish Old Testament was based on their writings, their history.”

Rana understood. “Their libraries.”

“Indeed. The Jews though had an axe to grind. Their rendition is, if nothing else a monumental distortion of the facts riddled with religious, political and most importantly historical inconsistencies.”

“Nothing new there. Everybody did it. The Greeks, the Romans, the Persians all emphasised their version of history. It came natural to them. As such history is a fabric of lies.”

“True enough. But since the Sumerians had the most ancient of surviving records do you think then that they might also have been closer to the truth?” sipping her luke warm tea.

“Historically speaking?” finishing off his milk biscuits. Then slurped some tea.

“Yes.”

“What’s that got to do with my father’s notes?”

“I’m coming to that.” She sipped her sweet tea. Rana watched the Americans with their garish clothes herded off in to one of the side streets in the bazaar to be fleeced.

“The Sumerians had in effect liberated humanity from the narrow customs of our ancestors savage brutality. They had broadened the outlook of life. Lifting it into and onto a cosmic dimension.”

“The Aryans.”

“Except they preceded them Rana..” touching his arm for emphasis for he was staring out into the street. “They gave us the possibility to gain the secret of infinity hidden within what had been up to then a veiled universe. And this was no mean feat. And,” she underlined, “they had help from enigmatic beings who were indubitably the gods of antiquity.”

“That is all known. A common theme Savarna sweetest.” Blowing her a kiss.

“Don’t be so prosaic husband of mine.” She mocked playfully.

“I’m sorry. More tea?”

“Please.” He ordered another pot.

“Well in one of the papers it is written that Noah was an adaptation of the Jews from the Sumerians. His name was really Astrakhasis who had been commanded by the gods to bury in Shurippak cuneiform tablets stemming from the days prior the deluge.”

“Shurippak?” the tea arrived. They refilled their cups.

“The City of Books Rana. The tablets that have survived revealed amongst other things the identity of Gilgamesh. You have heard of him.” He merely nodded. “Who visited this Astrakhasis. Apparently he, Astrakhasis could penetrate at a glance all secrets having the ability to lift the veil. Now what do you think that implies?”

He sipped the hot beverage.

”Penetrating the mantle of Maya.”

“Our sages have done that.” Looking with dismay at the empty plate of crumbs. These biscuits were truly heaven.

“That is not the point. This is before the flood dummy. Another legend has it that one of the gods, Ea, the Greeks called him Saturn or Cronos appeared to one of their kind Khaisastra to bury their tablets at Sippura, the City of the Sun and after the deluge to disinter the buried writings of the gods.”

“My. All this in the library? Interesting.”

“Rana, what am I going to do with you?” faking her displeasure.

“And we possess...what exactly?”

“I have stumbled across exactly that.”

“What?!” though wondering its relevance.

“I think we have such a fragment.”

“Of?”

“I think we have some of the writings, transcription, translation of the writings of the gods.”

Rana looked at his beautiful wife, stupefied. She smiled, dazzling teeth.

“I thought that would get your attention. You don’t know what this means to me. I could start my PhD.”

“That’s nice. But tell me do we have the actual transcription of their tablets?”

“No not quite. Don’t look so deflated. Come back to the flat and I’ll show you.”

He paid and they walked leisurely along the Ghanges. Skirting the fires where the dead were cremated, past bobbling boats their owners after their custom. Tethered mules brayed at them watching the muddy waters with the odd floating corpse drift by.

Back in the cool of their sunny home Rana was led into their library. Savarna sat behind the big scarred writing desk Rana standing next to her. The papers were neatly stacked into several piles. She shuffled momentarily amongst them then retrieved a yellowed page and began to skim read its contents.

“Apparently there was a man at the time of the Christian Crusades in ancient Palestine called Abysmus. He was a wandering Jew and Latin scholar studying what else but the Old Testament. Drawn to Damascus then a centre of learning. What Abysmus was primarily concerned with was the history of the kings of the Babylonian empire. He stumbled across an ancient treatise translated by an unknown Greek scholar. He says it contained blasphemies but admits it dealt with a past distant enough to cause serious consternation within the serried, divided and bigoted ranks of the theologians of the Roman Church. Whatever it was he had no wish to let this fall into Christian hands. So he goes to Damascus. Here he met the learned philosophers of the atabeg Museen-al-Deen. They conversed in Latin, the Muslim impressed with Abysmus. He let him stay at his

court. With an ulterior motive. For Abysmus claimed to have a text where he had evidence of the lineage of the Babylonian kings going directly back to the consorts of the angels of heaven. If that were proven it would consolidate the power of Islam as being under the protection of the celestial realm. The atabeg was swayed for such ideas were very complementary in that day and age. It was a heady vintage to be confronted with.”

“So this Abysmus said there was a direct link with the Babylonian...”

“Make that Sumerian. Abysmus was probably playing a clever game of politics at the time. He also realised that the Christians could never take the Levant. A lost cause.” Savarna explained.

“That’s it?”

“Almost. Abysmus said he was impressed with the learned Arabs. He then disappeared. But he left a record not of his travels but of the writings of the gods.”

“And we have a copy of it here?” Rana gasped.

Savarna holding up another sheaf of notes smiled triumphantly.

“You have read this?”

“Yes.” Eyes twinkling.

“What do you make of it?”

“Read it yourself.”

Randa did just that.

The prose was turgid. Heavily embellished and totally convoluted. At times Rana could make neither head nor tail of it. As to who was fighting who even that was lost upon him. Chaotic times. The narrator naturally belonged to a race of Elders who were guardians of what they called the Seals of Destiny.

In short an evil was arising on a young Earth still circled by alien moons when in the mists of ice receding glacial mountains a race of lower beings invaded the verdant plains of their civilisation. They feared oblivion. An epoch of disintegration threatening the planet.

The invaders were a race spawned by secret and forbidden arts arisen in a blighted land which they mirrored in their distorted souls. With this usurpation they gained a knowledge of their past which was best left alone.

With the dark arts they tore down from the heavens a mighty force receding into the very primordial depths of time. The effects were catastrophic for the outer ingress enthralled mankind by dark malignancies coming from alien agencies.

The gods were compelled to act. As the narrator himself had written:

*'Lest the wanton misuse of such powers which they had so criminally stolen and their race being devoid of all superior intelligence they could with impunity threaten and rend asunder the whole world. As time accumulated the coming calamity the race with their malign threats showed definite signs of an insanity encased in the furtive trappings of chaos which had come to dominate their whole being.'*

*'The Elders and the gods met in a city called Elysterium. Here they would try and guide this sunken race away from the threat of perdition. New sacred structures were created harnessing cosmic powers. But that was not all. Knowing this evil to be most paramount they also crafted a conurban necropolis where through the image of utter dread the gods could execute their divine plan unhampered by the mad ravages of these demented beings. That knowledge was codified in sacred writings recessed within enigmatic signs whose immutability would last through the rolling millennia to come.'*

*“To survive this daemonic onslaught. Armed with perdurable sciences they left for later generations glimpses of their beneficent powers. So that at a later age an ascending humanity would gain access to their legacy: astrology, writing, irrigation, architecture and all the other sciences by which the new race would once more arise. The gods satisfied that the information imparted upon the fledgling race was only one dim section of an unruffled surface of oceanic knowledge otherwise hidden.”*

So that is what Savarna was on about he thought to himself. But he was premature in his conclusion. There was more. It was not as simple as a fight between good and evil.

*‘Aeons passed. The pregnant heavens and the cognate mysteries gave humans an inexplicable link to a cast of beings totally ultra stellar in origin. This created a thirsting within to penetrate the mystery of not only their being but the power behind them. The most daring strove to wrench free these secrets hidden in secluded places.’*

Rana startled by what followed.

*‘By sepulchral nights the most audacious of their wizards gained insight upon lores not meant for them. And this information they hammered onto hellish tablets that would ultimately curse their own kind. It was to have profound consequences.’*

*‘Their minds twisted by this unearthly knowledge in turn shaped their view of the universe. The stars became the authors of a bleak destiny as they fell prey to a sinister art beyond their control. Their degenerate minds saw only an imperfect mirror as they became subject to the most evil of forces. Reality became inimical. So they sought refuge*



*in their dark gods. What really threatened the Earth was the all consuming and ever vigilant Chaos lurking either behind or within the gods themselves. But to them all this was a balm to their soul. They recorded this ill gotten knowledge on tablets which were handed down among their kind thus claiming to be divine inheritors of secrets not meant for the profane. In this they were right to just that. It did not help.'*

*'In their self congratulatory glory they were ill advised by their delusions. Destruction was immanent and the gods thought it necessary to strike from tomb encased time. The cursed malignancy of their race and the wisdom of the gods were now buried in ancient writings hidden and protected from the calamity to come. Ultra telluric destruction descended upon the world and the blackness of infinite night did squat over them. History crumbled to dust and the gods receded safely to their place of origin. Their cities were no more but remnants of their memories.'*

Rana had come to the postscript.

*'Thus ended the Cycles of Destiny from the Book of Seals to warn future mankind of the Iniquity and Blasphemous Damnation contained within the Tablets of Doom as transcribed by Nihil Baan and translated by Abysmus.'*

It was late. Only the waters of the Ganges lapped gently outside. In the library Rana heard his stertorous breathing. Savarna must have gone to bed.

What a document. His head was spinning for he wanted answers. His ignorance of mythology did not help. It all sounded familiar not unlike the gods of the Ramayana battling a titanic evil. Except here the result was not so clear cut as in their old tales.

It was then he heard the faint voice. Savarna must be chanting to one of the gods adorning their temple in the next room. Hopefully she was praying to Ganesh and not Kali. He did not have the energy to cope with another revelation. As the bedroom door was closed he could not make out what she was enunciating but it did not sound good. He was frightened by the intonation for the voice had a different timbre to it.

He rose as quietly as possible from his desk. That took some doing. Finally he managed to tiptoe to the bedroom. An eerie wisp of light shimmered through the gap on the floor. He stood immobilised certain one of the gods was speaking through her even though her words were a shambles, totally garbled. He slowly opened the bedroom door ever so gently. The light, misty white grew in intensity as Rana stood transfixed.

Savarna was on her hands and knees preoccupied on the floor where she was outlining something on a large piece of flat board. Above her within the temple alcove the white light harboured an adumbration. He could not tell who was making the sound but with a sudden crack of lightning the image faded into their little grotto. Savarna collapsed onto the floor in a swoon. Rana stood there mouth agape. Gingerly he approached her and hefted her onto the bed. Her eyes were rolled into the back of her head. He looked at what she had been doing. The lines, the design not unfamiliar. She was creating a mandala.

### **Vahnsin, Central Asia, circa 7000 BP**

Within the jump gate Zohex grasped its significance. Given that the earthquake, the volcanic eruptions, the collapse of the ocean floor, the incoming tidal wave had destroyed not just Tellurium but the dark occult invaders as well. His nemesis destroyed. The archimage of the eastern lands curtailed. The trap sprung and set. What appeared to be a calamity above was anything but within the area he found himself in.

An incomplete sphere materialised around him. Dotted along its circumference a few images flickered. Movement within. Avenues to possible worlds, potential realities. It all came to Zohex instantly. He the creation, originally a simulacrum created by the Deep Visionaries of distant Prima, a planet in another galaxy. Merduk somewhere else. No matter. He was on a mission. Determined for having been cast into a fate not of his own making. He would not be caught out again. So, whoever was behind his demise had wanted to see him sacrificed for as yet unknown reasons. Well he had survived. And now enshrined in the lilac sphere, crackling with potent energies Zohex glimpsed almost unlimited potentialities.

This was something of a higher order. In the back of his mind surging synaptic pathways extended themselves throughout his cyber brain. He was metamorphosing into a next generation of being. Unlike the psychic Deep Visionaries, he their creation he now had surpassed even their combined minds trying to locate his absence on Earth. Out of reach, out of mind, into timelessness. For the orb was sealed off from the rest of the universe. But he could access various realities in the still incomplete structure which did have Earth designated destinations.

He would resurrect himself on Earth. He was not done yet. He had tasted power, cherished the feeling of domination, understood the method necessary to achieve his aims. Set up once to fall with Tellurium. Not this time.

He searched amongst the few, maybe a dozen tiny images. Micro worlds available to him. He would choose one where he would reign supreme. With such limited realms, knowing as this realm syphoned more power from a near by monstrous black star in the centre of the galaxy of his creators, he instantly comprehended that he had more than just one avenue available to pursue. Searching Earth's convoluted history he chose, no, by all that is unholy, he was already manifest in a desolate desert location. Testing his powers for a very good reason. To draw off inimical parties wishing to see him fail. He watched with amusement as a black psychic man of power was fulfilling their vision of recreating a place of power. A possible bolt hole should another trap be sprung. The real target an ancient location in central Asia. Active due to the presence of the black magician whom he had bested. Potent cosmic forces sucked into its realm. Resurrected centuries later concomitant to the desert location. So he could be in more than one location at a time. Now that bordered on the miraculous. Accomplished from within this throbbing sphere.

He chose the ancient seat of power in the mountains to create a citadel resonating with his powers. Witt energies more than just natural. Beyond the capabilities of the Deep Visionaries. Something else was at play here. He would fathom it later. As for Merduk he was merely an insert. But not one to be dismissed. Merduk might not have his power but he too had access to the black jump gate. An artifice of cosmic dimensions.

...and arose firmly inserted in the bastion of his citadel at Vahnsin. Built atop a smaller mountain. The gateway to several minor kingdoms near him. To the east Shaviscara. Finally a name to the sorcerer whom he had bested centuries ago. To the north the towering mountains claimed to be the roof of the world. Malignancies lingered there. Demons, spirits, would be gods, practitioners of the dark arts. They would come to him for Zohex was supreme here. To the south a serried mountain range in a forlorn desert. Offering some protection from a brotherhood who's aims were diametrically opposed to his. Saving humanity from their own demented dreams. Well might they try. Their combined efforts would dissipate when confronted by his powers. And to the west a fledgling kingdom of no significance as yet. At best an irritant.

Surveying the barren rocky hills around him. In the valleys the peasants who tilled the soil for his tribe. As ancient as the world itself. Having seen conquerors come and go. Zohex one of many. But where others had succumb to forces beyond their reckoning, for this place was a veritable vortex sucking in from dimensionless space energies which needed a potent mind to meld into psychic form to be able to rule this occultly immersed mountain kingdom.

Merduk appearing next to him. It did not surprise Zohex. The two jump gates must have linked to the lilac sphere so that Merduk had traced Zohex into this reality. One where he was supreme. So Merduk either wished to be part of this venture to claim

eventually all of Earth or he was an intelligencer aligned with their cousins the Reganians who had made all this possible. Under Prima's guidance. Extracting data. By the very fact that the Reganians had not curtailed his efforts meant one of two things. Either they wanted Zohex to continue or they were unable to stop him. As such the next best thing to do was to observe him, wait for a fatal moment and then what? Strike him down? He was more than just sentient. Did they know this? He assumed so. His transition alone evidence enough of his changing incarnation. Merduk though remained the same: inconsequential.

Zohex adjusted the robes of lynx, costly woven silks rustling in the breeze. His magical amulets and rings flashing glittering light in anger. His strong hands grasping his leather belt. Merduk's penetrating look receded back into his skull. Trying to read his mind. Zohex maintained his dignity as magician-king.

"So you escaped your destined fate?" Merduk mocked.

"As did you. It was a trap. One either the Primaian's or Reganian's were aware of. Either way no matter. Whilst in Tellurium destiny did indeed decree my fate." And the back of his mind crackled with barely contained energy. His brain resonating with strange if not outright alien vibrations.

"Perhaps." Merduk equivocal. He too was aware that reality was just one possibility amongst many in this universe. He too had been within the lilac sphere. The jump gates pertinent for the transfer out of doomed Tellurium. But Merduk was merely an exo-biologist from Prima. Science and technology not his strong point. The lilac orb could well be a sub realm of Regum's WebSpace. A separate experiment. Puzzling in that Zohex had full access. What were the Reganian's up to? They had recalled neither of them as Tellurium crashed. Unless Zohex had, what? Usurped Regum's WebSpace?

Created his own niche in the universe? He sighed. This was not going to be easy. That was without considering the dark archimage who had lost his best. Interesting times. Then there was the problem of how to manifest the jump gates. They had miraculously appeared in their most dire moments. Were they aligned to their own individual resonant state? Made manifest by merely thinking? Or was some computer programme in place whereby inimical danger self activated this escape route. He hoped so.

So why had Prima allowed Zohex to continue at all? Tellurium was gone. Mission accomplished. But wait. Of course, how stupid. Many had left Tellurium prior the catastrophe. Seeding new civilisations. The sphere had mapped those. So the initial mission not that successful. Earth had recovered and continued. So Zohex had been allowed to continue to accomplish Prima's aims of aligning Earth. The work not yet complete. So much for the effect of the Deep Visionaries. They might influence individuals but that was about all. Merduk wondered how much of that was pertinent to Zohex..

When a bolt out of the blue immobilised Merduk as the two of them were surveying the barren landscape beneath the citadel. The image of a woman who would undo Zohex's quest to rule not just this land but the continent and then like the scheming archimage to the east dominate the world. Such futility smacked off self inflated delusions. The idea flawed. On this planet anyway.

Zohex in his mind. He had grasped the visage of the woman. Like a rabid dog now obsessed in bringing her down. Such a waste. Zohex determined to brook no interference. Even though, it was uncanny how reality expanded once one was within a reality, whereby inherent data revealed itself as part of the milieu. In this case the legend of Zohex's fall due to the dark haired woman whose father had been usurped by Zohex!

Incredible. By Zohex inserting himself here, in this time and this space he had dislocated this reality to his reality. At a price. The fall of the then current king. With his daughter destined to follow Zohex had by his arrival displaced that reality and replaced it with this reality. With perturbations. That this woman would seek to reclaim her rightful throne. By bringing Zohex down.

Merduk could not resist but mention this legend. How would he get around that?

“She will submit.” Zohex sneered. Dismissive. A minor point of order.

“It is not a matter of possessing the woman. It is a matter of possessing all this.”

Merduk gestured indicating the totality of it all. “She is but an effect, not a cause.” Which he knew was rather tenuous. One reality amongst many. Still it was an interesting study in how they as individuals came replete with an embedded history.

Merduk aware of his history would try and ascertain Zohex’s. They had both chosen this locale. Zohex the warrior king. Wrapped in animal furs as if transmutating into half sentient half beast. The influential resonance of this place, this planet, this time?

“I will go to the sacred chamber.” Merduk said at last. Zohex fixated upon something. Probably the woman. If she would be his doom Merduk made sure he was not caught in Zohex’s curtailed fate. Wrapping his woollen cape around him, the mountain breeze icy. The flames of torches flickering sending curlicues of smoke into the still cool air. He heard the chanting of the neophytes. Discordant ululations bordering on madness. Zohex relishing the destruction of lesser minds. Feasting on their souls. Like a god. What had his race created?

He walked into a mighty chamber at ground level. Its twisted columns ancient. Seat of the priest-kings of the Turanian Race the original rulers of Vahnsin. Then out of the overbearing portals of the temple and into the open. The sun having just set cool



shadows extending across the stone floor. The guards motionless as Merduk headed for one of the apartments in the citadel. His own retreat. He fell gladly onto his bed. One moment in fallen Tellurium, then via that diversion of the cyber-sphere into this realm. Tracking Zohex.

The link severed. An image of the citadel of Elburz. Practitioners of the sacred arts which appealed to Merduk. A refuge in case Zohex went volatile. He was a creation, a simulacrum of the Deep Visionaries, now with his own volition. Merduk almost sensed the Keepers of Elburz's enchanting mantras. Their audible profundity reaching into his mind. A clarion call to those not as yet subsumed by the alien impregnatory prayers of Zohex's priests. The hope of their inner mental vast realms a counterpoint to Vahnsin's dark rites. Their eternity germinal.

Maybe if Zohex was left to his own devices he would self corrupt. Leaving Merduk master of the situation, of this reality. One cleansed of Zohex's contaminated mind.

## Napier

Evening approached turning the landscape into an indigo blue. Jacko through sacred rites was after days of preparing himself thoroughly aligned with the potent presence of the Dreamtime. Ready for the task in bringing it back to life. Delete the narrow focus of the white man crowding out his ancestors realm.

Generations had come and gone and with each new birth his people became more unfocussed, more confused and in the end totally indifferent to their monumental heritage. Jacko though did not despair. Not now having found through his own shamanistic powers a benefactor from the stars.

Revelations granted at the burial ground where the ancient sorcerer slept generating dreams to awaken what had been forgotten. Granting a vision of redemption. This land soon cleansed of the whites. A new dawn to brighten his people's inner resurrection. Become once again companions to the sky gods. The promise of their indelible future.

Jacko felt the energy of what was to be in his bones. His body lighter, his mind clearer, his spirit feeling limitless every time he communed with the Great One. Getting closer to their ancient glorious past. Soon transmuted into the present. The reawakening closer and soon usurp the narrowness of the white intruders.

It was time to continue to enact the cleansing.

Something disturbing and intrusive moved surreptitiously through Jim's disquieting dream. An intense, physical presence. Awake. The sense of wrongness

profound. Shaking the sleepiness from his mind he heard the distant chant resounding in his mind. For the first time the strange harmonies frightened him. A shiver shook his body even though it was summer. Susan was sleeping peacefully covered by just a linen sheet. She looked vulnerable which he now felt himself though could not tell why. A presence closing in.

Reluctantly he rose grabbing a pair of bathers thrown over an antique chair next to their open bedroom door. Crackling lightning ripped through the night air, its after burn illuminating the living room.

Jim looked out the window thinking it to be a summer storm. The stars shone above. All was quiet. The heat onerous. Perhaps a car had crashed outside the front gate. Damming himself for not having a torch handy he moved carefully towards the corridor when to his consternation he heard movement in the house. Not wishing to alarm his still sleeping wife he tiptoed down the hall.

Someone was definitely there. The movements lithe. Jim's knees were turning to jelly even though he knew he was fit enough to take on any unarmed intruder.

Whoever it was had not moved. Maybe it was just Jacko. The bloke had been acting strange of late. With that thought he gained some confidence.

Sure enough there was Jacko standing silently in the centre of the living room. An ancient primordial fear gripped Jim. Premonitions of disaster assailed him. His flesh was crawling ready to fall off his bones. A dark gelatinous aura surrounded the station hand. His face different. There seemed no discernable features except for his eyes which were dark pools of nothingness ready to open monumental horrors threatening to annihilate him.

Sudden revulsion flooded through his mind. Of life, his marriage, the farm, everything. Then came the nausea. Bile black and putrid exploding out of his stomach. Tears of exertion were pouring from his eyes. The stench overwhelming. The adamite figure merely watched him as Jim went to the kitchen and opened the drawer.

Jacko was ready when Jim came gingerly into his living room. He felt the nervousness emitted from his body, sensed the fright emanating from his mind. Patiently he waited for the inevitable to play itself out.

Since Jacko's resurrection as Jalnura he had been surprised how open the mind of the white man was. His first impression here one of rampart mental chaos.

Arriving at night definitely helped. The cloak of darkness allowed him to blend into the background more easily. Jim just stared at him. Jacko on the other hand merely looked at the quivering human barely containing his glee at this unfortunate who thought he could challenge him. The mind confronting him was weak, its will a sham. To him this corpular degeneration could barely summon the courage to resist him. Had the white man then debased himself so much over the years that nothing could challenge the power of the Dreamtime?

As the despicable figure in front of him trembled in fear Jack was amused to see the contents of his stomach pour forth uncontrollably. He allowed himself this small entertainment before he would discard this animated hoax of life. He let Jim wallow in the revulsion which was really the projection of Jacko's indomitable will. So much for his boss's mind.

Seeing the putrid convulsions were finished Jim set to work and concentrated. He sensed his opponent's lack of will to live. How unfortunate. So be it.

Then watched with perverted amusement as the quivering adumbration reached into a drawer and withdraw a gleaming broad bladed knife. He followed serenely as Jim in front of him entered the bed chamber where Susan lay stirring restlessly in her sleep. She too felt Jacko's presence but she would never know what was to befall her.

His captive plunged the knife violently and repeatedly into the warm flesh of his wife. How quickly love could turn to twisted hate. The screams of the thrashing woman were soon stilled by the soul which departed the warm mangled corpse. Her life ceased. With almost bored indifference he watched Jim turn the blade upon himself. As the screams pierced the not so happy home Jack left calmly shutting the front door behind him.

The cleansing for his people's resurrection had begun.

### **Sydney**

"Martin you look like shit." Max beamed rising out of habit, shaking hands.

“Good to see you and yeah feel like it too.” After drinking at the uni bar, then to the Ancient Britton hotel until that closed. Max was like an older brother to Martin. That is where the similarities ended. Max in an old t-shirt and jeans. He wore nothing else during summer or any other season except in winter. Lived the life of leisure, ran what to Martin was a dodgy business curing pseudo neurotics by dubious means. What Max laughingly termed ‘regressional analysis’. Whatever that was supposed to mean. His lovely wife Joanne his secretary and back up manager. All achieved with a basic degree, double major in psychology. Racking in the money.

Max had done Martin the favour of meeting him at the uni bar. Early afternoon and mostly empty. The sun shone obliquely through uncurtained windows overlooking a small nature reserve and the library complex.. Immediately Max went to the bar and came back with two frothing schooners.

“So how’d it go?”

“Getting there.” Indicating his thesis. Not his frightening trip out at Napier.

Max took a long swig relishing the golden ambered lager. He lit a cigarette offering one to Martin who accepted it with a wave of appreciation. Martin was perpetually broke. Max wasn’t.

“How’d you like to work for me?” Typical Max. Just like that.

“Doing what?” at a loss.

“Research assistant.”

“You mean finding justifications regarding your patient’s neurosis?”

Max half drained his glass as Martin puffed away. When he had said nothing Max continued: “Have they offered you a position upon completion?”

“I already tutor first year students.” Small change.

“Must be interesting.”

“Riveting.”

“I can match their salary. Hourly basis that is.”

“Tempting. Researching exactly what?”

“You know yourself why I set up my venture. Getting into their dream mythology. Sort of post-modern deconstructionalist Jungian in depth penetration.”

“Meaning?” feeling buoyant by the beer.

“The archetypal unconscious. Jung is only the beginning for me. But that is only the cover.” Smiling at some delicious secret. “I’ve got something that might interest you.”

Martin picked up on Max’s hint then froze as Thomas Jogden entered the bar and with delight spread across his too wide a face headed straight for them.

“Watch out Max.” Martin whispered.

Thomas still looked like a hippy. Long hair, flared jeans and tie-dyed t-shirt all swirling purple. The sociologists version of a groovy lecturer. He had studied under him in his second and final year of sociology. Thomas was good at articulating in mystifying waffle and academic jargon the bleeding obvious. And was the darling of the department.

“Martin.” He boomed looking at Max as well. Must be his wide spaced eyes.

“Hi Thomas.” Martin mumbled “Max Thomas Thomas Max.”

“May I join you?” Max gave Martin the look.

“If you shout.” Max suggested. Thomas tensed whilst his smile went brittle.

“Err beers all around. VB?”

With Thomas at the bar Max whispered: “Is he the prick you’ve been telling me about? You know the one who had a go at you for not attending some conference.”

“Yeah the one and only wunderkind.”

“What’s he talking to you for then?”

“Checking the weather. See if I sink or float or soar. Hedging his bets. Once he knows I’m in or out according to him he’ll either crawl up my arse or pointedly ignore me.”

“I guess you prefer the latter.”

“You got that right.”

“Why don’t you...” but Thomas was back with three middies.

“I’ve managed to get some computer time for my research.” Thomas gloated.

“Making any space for me?” Martin bluffed.

“Sorry. You know how hard it is to get time allocated. The engineers hog it for themselves mostly.” Thomas being smug. Then took out a pouch of tobacco and proceeded to roll one. “How you going?”

“Getting there.”

“You’ll do fine. It’s original.”

“Gotta be for a PhD.”

Max finished his schooner and went for the midie.

“Just keep to the script as I did. Avoid the word ‘mythology’. Call it the ‘revealed subconscious’.”

Max bothered to pay attention. See what the academics were up to stubbing out his cigarette.

When Martin said nothing hoping Thomas would get the hint, nothing doing, he went on: “Be rational. Scientific. Remember the causal phenomena were in generis epistemologically based thought patterns.”



“If they thought like that they be constipated.” Max quipped. Looking forlornly at the small glass of beer, which he finished.

“Well buddy,” Martin cringed, “gotta go. Max.” and went off to the only other table where some students seemed impressed that the wunderkind deemed them acceptable company.

“Well glad that’s over.” Max smiled. “Get ya another?”

“Haven’t finished...shit yeah.”

When Max returned with two more beers he said: “Heard there was a double suicide up your way.”

“What?!”

“Some couple. Bloke lost the plot. Murdered his wife then carved himself up.”

Martin blanched.

“You don’t look too good sunshine.”

“I just been there. They say who?”

“Naw. Can’t remember. Only the town was mentioned I think. Yesterday’s arvo paper.”

They could hear Thomas pontificating in that voice of his about some vague phenomenological problem regarding the sociological construction of reality. Martin was glad he’d stayed with history. Starting on his next beer.

“Does he always wank on like this?” Max asked.

“Should hear the professor.”

“Oh shit.”

“So what is this offer of yours then?”

“Friends in strange places.” Max’s eyes twinkling. “Currently overseas. Finding things that are, ahm, not exactly the script we’ve been lead to believe is history.”

“Yeah?” stubbing out his cigarette which he’d forgotten about during Thomas’s quick hello.

“I hope it don’t interfere with my work.”

“You Martin worry too much. Who knows, you might get access to it.”

“Is your friend gonna publish?”

“Early days. However he is associated with an obscure by design, remember that Martin, research organisation. Very private.” Max looking serious.

“Really?”

“With their own archives.”

The tempter.

“Anonymous.”

Teasing.

“Where? What?” was the best Martin could come up with. Having finished his beer Max suggested they drive back to his establishment. Martin sculled the schooner, got a rush, took two goes to get up and finding his balance wandered behind Max, giving a laconic wave to Thomas. Whether Thomas returned the gesture Martin didn’t care. Max’s offer tempting. He could always take a year of absence. For the moment he realised how little he knew about Max.

Max pulled up at a large old house a few streets down from the uni. The entrance classic neo-modern ethnic with fake white columns, Mediterranean brick arches, yellow bottle glassed windows, cement embedded pebbles instead of grass. Into the narrow open

hallway. The living room reception, the converted bedrooms for the clients where their one on one therapy took place. Ambient music.

“Hi Joanne.” Martin beamed as Max went to the toilet. In her early thirties with stylish short black hair and unblemished white skin she smiled at him. Max upon returning gave her a wet kiss, Martin could hear the squelching of his lips.

“Petra is in session.” Joanne said, all business.

“Ah yes. The reincarnating one. Meditating nicely?”

“That’s what we’re here for. And you’re late.”

“Just sweetheart.”

After Max was finished with Petra they retired to the smallest of rooms which was Max’s study. A littered desk and three book cases groaning with books, rolls, files. Max extracted one nearly spilling the lot, saved just in time and sat with Martin in two old stuffed armchairs. The rickety coffee table stained and burnt.

Martin could tell from the copies he beheld that what this portended was engrossing regarding his studies. Not exactly necessary for his thesis but interesting enough not to ignore.

“Where did you get this?” looking up. Max had made some instant coffee for them both.

“One of the researchers. Well the researcher. Comes from Syria, or was that Iraq? Same difference.”

“What are you doing with it here?”

“Martin does it matter?”

“No, not really.”

“Interesting? Hm?” Max watching Martin go through the photocopies.

“This been authenticated?”

“Martin, it’s just been discovered.”

Max lit a cigarette as Martin concentrated on this historic document. Maybe that is why he was wanted. This was his field after all.

Max said: “I’ll get straight to the point. Cylinder seals. Transcribed by one Abysmus.”

Martin looked up. “Strange name.”

“Yeah. Could be garbled. You’re into ancient stuff.” Max had his own copy.

“Like *`when in the mists of ice receding glaciers a lower race of beings known as Man had been torn from the realm of a mighty empire to become the dwellers in a lower kingdom which had been named the Elemental Sphere. ’.*”

“The Fall from Eden?” Martin asked. “Your friend’s got the original?”

“Sure has.”

“Lucky.”

“And how about this: *`A race did arise from blighted lands. They had by secret and forbidden practices discovered the hidden Arts. ’* Blah blah blah and yes, *`enthralled mankind who deified himself by dark malignancies and alien agencies. ’.*”

“Bit obscure.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that but they didn’t know you were going to do a thesis or whatever now did they?” without rancour. “If you work with us...”

“Yes I see.” Feeling frustrated. As much as he liked what he saw he wanted something more concrete. Then there was the minor, he laughed at that, problem of actually fitting it into his work. Still this Abysmus had saved something seemingly so out

of this world it made Martin wonder just how much they did not know regarding their ancient past. Especially prior the universal flood.

“Get this.” Max in his element. *‘The gods were compelled to act,’* because *‘they’* meaning presumably mankind, on page four, *‘with impunity threaten and rend asunder the whole planet.’*”

“The coming of the Flood perhaps.” Martin guessed.

“Worlds in Collison.”

“Velikowski. Unquotable academically.”

“Then it goes on about a council at some place called *‘Elysterium’* where some special temple was built for the gods to visit who were convinced mankind was on the way to some malignant madness. So the gods conceal their secrets in quote *‘sacred writings, recessed within enigmatic signs whose immutability lasted for the many rolling millennia.’*”

“Well their numbering was always at best extravagant. Still the Hindu’s believed in civilisations on earth going back into astronomical time spans. Why not this lot?”

“Why not indeed? By now we come to all the stuff where the gods give mankind a glimpse of their knowledge so that we have the birth of the city state, writing, astronomy, irrigation, ships. But it seems that the wizards of the day discovered something among the stars that wasn’t too healthy.”

“Talking healthy Max I gotta go for a piss.”

“Go then.”

Returning Max continued: “You might like this. Page ten. It seems that after this discovery the gods got a bit shitty and quote *‘thought it necessary to strike from tomb encased time.’* Which could be anything really. So we skip to the last page. The finale

whence *'the blackness of infinite night did squat over them,'* more ramblings” Max muttered then finding the spot continued: “the gods blast this city but something goes horribly wrong for *'instead undreamt of horrors arose and an incommutable damnation hung over the smitten world.'* “ glancing up at Martin. “Not finished yet. *'lured on by bizarre beings'* not gods mind you *'serving a darker and most singular power.'* Called forth I believe *'from impenetrable interstellar depths.'* “

“And no one has ever found anything like it.”

“Hope not. Another coffee?”

“Yes thanks. So this is it?” waving the pages.

“Just the postscript with Abysmus mentioning *'the cycle of destiny from the Book of Seals,'* to warn *'future mankind of the iniquity and blasphemous damnation contained within the Tablets of Doom as transcribed by Nihil Abham.'* Given you being an expert in the field Martin...”

“Confronted with what appears to be genuine I don’t know what to say.” The offer of coffee forgotten. “I’ve waited for this moment for so long and now I feel both overawed and at the same time sceptical.”

“That’s not like you, surely.”

“It’s my academic training.” A bit lame he thought.

“Well that is good then. I admire you for your honesty. I certainly don’t want you to take all this at face value. No one wants egg on their face that’s for sure.”

“The trouble is,” Martin began hesitantly, “dating this. It’s at the end of an ice age. But awfully vague. Good as a foot note. Calamities were not uncommon then. Especially in those primitive times. A local flood becomes a national disaster. The rulers always portrayed themselves as super human so defeats suffered by them from their

enemies were blown out of proportion. To us. The best I can come up with is that it is antediluvian. Maybe.” He added for good measure.

“OK. Just one more piece in the puzzle.” As Max rummaged through the loose pages. “Abysmus mentions a stone tablet which relates to, quote, *fated history of the fall of the Gate of Il-Ra*’ last seen, ahm, according to this in the Akkadian city of Ka-Ra.”

“Sound Egyptian Max.”

“Who Martin my son claim to be from Atlantis.”

“Which every professor spews on every time they hear of it. Lead balloon Max.”

“Must be frustrating for them. Everyone knows of it, mythologies refer to it, Egyptians claim to come from it and no one’s as yet found it. Must be a bummer.” Max delighted with that appraisal.

“Thing is Max no one at any university cares.”

“So let’s prove them wrong.”

“No can-do. You’ll be ignored. The only thing that could be agreed upon is that we were around prior the flood.”

“So Martin I put it to you.”

Martin was getting sucked into the subject before them. “What is that Max?”

“Join me in finding these artefacts.”

“Where?”

“Wherever it takes us. Kathmandu for starters.”

“There. You said it was in Iraq or somewhere.”

“That is where we will meet. Initial enquiries. The Buddhists have records going back into mythology you know.”

“Who’s paying?” Martin being practical.

“Not you that’s for sure. No mate, money’s no problem. These people are cashed up.”

“People?”

“Talking people Martin. You hitched up at the moment?”

“Nope.”

“Good.”

“For the moment. So what’s the deal?”

“We head out sooner than later. Got a passport?”

“I’ll get one.”

“Right. I’ll do the bookings.”

“What do I do?”

“What you do best. Source material, authenticate objects, scrolls, remnant writings.”

“I’ll take leave of absence. What if I don’t get it?”

“How long you been working on your thesis?”

“A year.”

“Well if you get lucky who knows....”

Though Martin was coming around to the idea that this research trip was the chance of a life time he didn’t feel right about it. Like he was trespassing on someone else’s domain. Of the mind. Delving into something that was not his. Flaunting some unspoken, unclarified taboo. But then again an opportunity like this was more than rare. He just didn’t like all this talk of madness and doom and destruction being wrought by entities who presumably had once trod on this earth. Maybe they were waiting and



watching and if he or Max or whoever opened the tombs of time then they, he could be in real shit. Beyond the help of the best psychiatrists.

“Alright.” Martin said reluctantly. “I’ll get my stuff together. Talk to my prof first thing tomorrow. Get inoculated. Kathmandu did you say?”

“Make that central Asia Martin.”

“Thank you for the offer Max.”

“Thank our lucky stars. Or rather our secret benefactors.”

“Yes. Who are they?”

“Now now.”

“No I mean are they a research institute or what?”

“Not telling.”

“But I am in?”

“You are that indeed.”

“Not shit I hope.”

“Celebratory drink. I’m busting for a few more beers.”

### **Kathmandu, Nepal**

Martin looked out of the small window of the taxing Boeing 727 admiring the jagged slither of the Himalayas crowned by towering white cumulous clouds. There were mainly Indians and Nepalese with their distinctive caps on the flight from Calcutta. The Indians impatient to get off. Jittery in the narrow aisle the Nepalese laughing and joking amongst themselves. Martin and Max the few tourists waiting to disembark.

Walking stiff leggedly down the metal mobile staircase they approached the tumble down buildings that was the airport. Yawning from the air inside the jet it was a delight to breathe the pristine air in the Kathmandu Valley.

At the arrival lounge, looking like a makeshift counter officials in military uniform suggested they change some of their foreign currency into local rupees. Only then were their passports cleared for entry, stamped with great flourish. Behind the counter a massive sign informing them it was illegal to take hashish out of the country. A smaller sign welcomed them to the royal mountain kingdom.

A tumultuous scene of locals, taxi drivers, cacked mud brown laughing children dodging amongst those greeting friends and relatives. A few taxi drivers tried to get their

custom, offering their prices of accommodation which Max politely ignored. Even if they were not rich the Nepalese were genuine in their happiness.

A tall bearded man stood towering above the rest of the noisy crowd. The others from the plane already dispersed. Max lugging his suitcase along with Martin and his rucksack shoved their way through the playful shrieking children. Max shook hand with the giant.

“Welcome Max, Martin. I am Johann Rosenberg, call me John.” He beamed blue eyes sparkling in his robust face.

“Nice to be here. Pleased to meet you.” Martin pleasantly surprised regarding the locals. A difference from down on the plains. “Amazing fresh air.”

John led them to an older diesel Mercedes, cranked open the boot where they stored their luggage.

Out of the small car park heading down a narrow tarmacked road bumping their way past lush green paddy fields. Martin in the back drinking in the ambience. He decided he liked Nepal.

“So John what’s here?”

“Iraq, useful is a dump.” John laughed “Too many on the take, too much gossip. The manuscripts I obtained, location classified, you understand with some baksheesh. We know,” passing a bullock dray, “it’s Akkadian, I think.” Smiling at his uncertainty.” On my way here, I’ll get to that, passing through India met up with a contact. Dr Praj Tamralipti. Heard of him?”

Max shook his head.

“No. Good library. It was he who hinted of ancient pre-Buddhist stone tablets or tablet. Sort of flat seals regarding the Sumerians. And this tablet is at Swaymbhu. One of the best Buddhist libraries around. So here we are.”

“This tablet wouldn’t be the Lapis Lazuli of the Healing Buddha? The Pure Diamond Land mantras?” Max asked lighting a cigarette. They were stuck behind a colourfully painted truck belching fumes.

“Stick to your imports. Local cigarettes are disgusting.” John made a break, passed the truck only to see an oncoming one which they missed, just. Luckily Martin had not watched the road. “So, impressed with what we got?”

“I’m thinking conflation.”

“Most definitely.”

“And your Indian friend...”

“Purely an academic exercise.”

They were approaching the outskirts of Kathmandu. John concentrating on weaving his way through the countless bicycles, blaring his horn to gain some room in this tumultuous congestion. Mules laden with bales and sacks scraped the side of their car, bells jingled from rickshaws, trucks and buses honking their way along. Huts set back from the road tiny as garages, thatched rooves.

The further they bumped and bounced their way into the city the louder and more congested the streets became. Along small shops filled with goods of all sizes and description. The buildings medieval, shuttered windows, ornately carven doors, some walls bent. Into an alley hemmed in by narrow walls then through an open gate driving up a dusty path in a struggling lawn.

An old two storey colonial building painted a hideous shade of light blue. The Mercedes stopped in front of the gate flanked by two false Greek columns. Martin happy to stretch his legs as they got out.

“This is it.” Rosenberg announced. A Nepalese came out to help with the luggage.

“Welcome to the Hilton.” He laughed in excellent English.

“Ah. Allow me to introduce Johnny Two. He’ll show you to your rooms.”

Proceeding into the cool.

Upstairs Martin’s room was next to Max’s. Sparsely furnished, single bed, hard mattress, wicker chair and an old rickety school desk. The view the courtyard as dusty as the front lawn. One huge tree offering welcome shade under which were chairs taken by the look form a school.

John came up showed them where the showers and toilets were, when the hot water was on. Offering tea in the courtyard. On their way down they passed the smoke filled kitchen where a woman was squatting next to a clay stove brewing a pot of tea. She was introduced as Mahindra, smiles all around.

“Friends?” she asked, her radiance beaming contentment. Slender, dressed in a pale green sarong. The red dot on her forehead indicating she was married.

“Yes.” John said, “came all the way for your remarkable cooking.”

She thought this funny. The wood hissed with a hint of an aroma.

“We’ll be in the courtyard.”

They sat in not to steady chairs built for midgets. John pulled up a park bench for himself.

Mahindra arrived with a tray of tea and three chipped cups. They helped themselves. Obviously no milk. Just sugar.

“So what can you tell us?” Max asked blowing on his tea.

“Tamralipti is working on some remnant documents trying to decipher this tablet at the temple. Thinks it might predate Sanskrit.”

“Interesting.”

“He’s excited. Nothing certain yet.”

Martin felt tired. He excused himself. Last night at the hotel in Calcutta they had drunk until three in the morning. He wondered at Max’s stamina.

After Martin had left Johann became serious. He put his cup precariously next to him on the bench.

Then came out with it: “What do you know about psychotronic warfare?”

“Someone’s convoluted definition of someone else’s idea of siphoning military funds into their pet project. Not yours by any chance?” the tea had made Max perky.

Johann suppressed a smile. “There are certain parallels involved here.”

“Making your dreams come true. In a nasty way of course.”

“Certain events are in motion.”

“Oh don’t tell me. A conspiracy.”

“The Soviets are heavily into parapsychology. The West frowns even though our friends the Yanks tried that with the Nautilus experiment. The US navy attempting to counter jam the Soviets. It’s becoming fashionable in military circles.”

“Bending spoons? That’ll upset their dinner.”

“Think of the mass demonstrations across the West ten years ago.”

“That could be the KGB Johann.” Tasting his tea.

“The occult resurfacing Max.”

“And the Soviets are behind this? Were I should say. Things are pretty relaxed.”

“We believe that certain a-political forces are awakening. Opting for themselves to first stir up both sides to make sure neither is dominant. Perfect for them to insert themselves.”

“Sabotaging both sides. Neat. How they camouflaging themselves. Indian gurus?”

“The growing cults, the pseudo-religious. Early days. Reminds me of the late nineteenth century. The occult surfacing, then mass hysteria on the eve of World War One. After that Thule in Germany, the potent Hindu symbol, the swastikas. The threat to organised religion, the destruction in Europe of democracy.”

“To the former no dead loss. The latter though worrying. Trouble is John religion is usually a front for something far more sinister. Group control. Subsuming individuality. Take your pick. Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Same difference. Been going on since forever. But you think there is a new phenomena gestating?”

“Yes.”

“Success rate? I mean the Nazis self destructed. The occult went down with that. The West won that one though I know, I’m aware of Soviet expansion. All above board given what we are dealing with. But a new force, interesting.”

“Creating fringe religions. Obscure political groups. All testing their presumed influence. Becoming prime subjects. The rise of indigenous objectives. The West is fracturing whilst the East is consolidating..” Johann clarified. His tea forgotten.

“Anarchy. Potent. Too much confusion.”

“People at odds with each other. What happens then Max?” looking at him.

“They hit the piss.”

“Seeking refuge. Political or religious. But the old answers don’t work. These people want something else. New recepies, new directions. A coming psychic spiral into

a new dark age Max.”

“OK. That’s the superstructure. We can assume these people are not mainstream. Not even Freemasons or Opus Dei. Or the Communist Party. Which leaves what? And how do we fit into this?”

“Counter tactics.” Johann being deliberately vague. “Now superficially…”

“Know the feeling.” Max joked.

“The powers above are influencing the powers below.”

“You are talking figuratively I assume.”

“And that Max.”

“Getting rumbled by gurus.”

“In a way.”

“Hoodoo Voodoo.”

“Call it what you like. It’s what the mind perceives which determines how the individual acts.” Johann elucidated. He drank some tea.

“The aim? Don’t tell me. World government. Tried by the Christians and failed. The French Revolution with some success. Socialism, creaking along. The Nazis, failed. What makes you think this new force is gonna go one better?”

“Bring down both the West and the Communist bloc. Step into the breach. Create the breach. Channel resentment and hatred to nefarious ends. When I was in Iraq I felt the tension, like being in a powder keg. Not just Iraq. Iran. The shah’s days are numbered. The mullah’s are stirring. They all despise the west even though they want all its benefits. Without realising one has to think a certain way and forget the tribe or one’s religion as being paramount.”

“Can’t see that happening.”



“The foundations are being rearranged. First the fracture, then the rubble and when despair overwhelms reason...”

“Insert some vague form of salvation. Sounds like both the Church and the Communists Johann.”

“Ethnic ghettos for instance.”

“Yeah but that is voluntary. So what have we really got Johann? Disarray. I grant you that. But so far it is splinter groups covering the whole spectrum of human behaviour. From the occult and new agers, to aboriginal rights, fragmenting politicians, far right control freaks and a few humanists lost in it all.”

“That is only the beginning. Once the mainstream religions and political parties see their numbers dwindle they will self corrupt to attract the dissatisfied back. Thus creating negative momentum.”

“That include the Soviets?”

“Ah.” Johann beamed. “The wild card. Currently expanding. They are using psychotronic warfare to destabilize us.”

“It might come back and bite ‘em in the bum.”

“If nothing is done. The implosion of the Soviet Empire would unleash the worst of the worst our way. The need for a new enemy. And we as humans have never been short in that department.”

“Yes sad to say. And our research fits into this global phenomena?”

“You read the effect the Tablets had on their possessors.”

“Calamitous. Are we in possession...?”

“Perhaps.” Johann more relaxed. He drained his tea. Max had forgotten his.

“So we have the Soviets working in the dark.” He thought that amusing. “The mullah’s in Iran stirring. The Middle East no change. Africa in turmoil. Asia though gives one hope. Maybe it’s them.”

“No they are realists. One ray of hope there. Not obsessed with religion. I mean south-east Asia. India will remain stable. Pakistan though and Afghanistan are unknowns. Then there are the central republics. They could fracture.”

“OK we got that. Europe?”

“White anted from within. Fed by the Soviets of course. Stage one. Social disintegration and you have the field ready for harvesting in a new dark age.”

“I’m still confused Johann. You’re saying these seals or tablets are bad juju.”

“Only if they tamper with the dark.”

“Bit vague.”

Johann sighed.

“I mean it. We need data, verifiable facts.”

“Of that I am aware. Suffice it to say these tablets that have resurfaced are harbingers of monumental changes. I was just giving you the outline.”

Martin returned having rested from his cat nap. He was too excited to sleep. Nepal the buzz.

“Beer anyone?” Max wanting to relax. Johann’s prognosis if not depressing certainly not encouraging. How to combat irrational forces? The very thing the Weimar Republic had faced and lost out against.

They returned their tea cups to the kitchen then headed off into the city. Down the narrow alley where pedestrians were fewer. Into a broader street, small Toyota taxis beeping their way through the throng. Colourful shopfronts displaying curries, fruit and

vegetable, silks, woollen apparel, pots and pans. Skirting behind a white ornate colonial building, some ministry they found a bar with outside tables frequented by tourists and a few wealthy locals.

The took a table. A choice of two beers. Singa and Fosters. Singa won.

“Martin. You read the notes. What is your opinion?” Johann asked.

“I like the idea of star dwellers. Gives me hope we’re not the only mistake in the universe. Then there is the allusion to multi-dimensional space where hidden entities lurk.” He smiled. Reality imitating fiction. Invigorating.

“Yes. Nicely summed up. So Martin could they make a come back?”

The beers they had ordered arrived. They cheered each other.

“You mean is someone down here opening up portals for them to come back? Or conversely are they making a comeback?”

“That is the question.”

“Well do we know who down here could achieve this?”

“In theory yes.” Johann not wishing to go any further. He didn’t know. Except the Soviets pursuing their psychotronic warfare. It could be them, if they knew where the seals or tablets were located. Johann through Praj had found one here. Thus their presence.

“The point though escapes me.” Martin considered. “What would be the purpose?”

“A new age Martin.”

“Is that good?”

“Would you like to be ruled by an alien?”

“Well according to the Babylonians they helped fledgling mankind on their way.”

“To be sure, yes. But there were darker forces who wanted us to fall.”

“Yes I see. How to tell them apart before it is too late.”

“Indeed.” Johan tasting his beer. Max had nearly finished his. Martin just starting on his.

When no one said anything Johann continued: “Hindu and Buddhist philosophers have always analysed psychologically perceived reality. That reality is a sort of resonance. Something quantum physics is not denying. The reality we think we know is the result of vibrations on an atomic scale which our brain picks up. But these vibrations are not constant. Quantum mechanics. Now if this atomic resonance can be changed then so will reality.”

“Scary. You mean these tablets are resonators?” Martin impressed.

“Exactly.” Johann delighted. “It created civilisation as we know it.”

“And it can change or destroy it as well.” Max worried.

“That is the big one. For good or for evil.”

Max ordered another round.

“These tablets, and there are more than just one were crafted by a race dimly remembered in hushed awe,”

Max popped his beer and poured himself a glass, admiring its inner glow then took a healthy swing, Johann observing distractedly.

“...and a conspiratorial silence. They had to for they ascended the heavens only to incur the wrath of the gods dimly remembered in our mythologies. Gilgamesh, Lucifer resurrected in secret cabals in ancient Arabia when Adamite man walked this planet.”

“So,” Max said, “these tablets were hidden because of their dark design, their inimical potential to conjure up the pit of oblivion. An entrancing darkness known as the void or the abyss which when confronted results in a catastrophe of global proportions.”

“Which is their aim.” Johann finished off.

“Why?” Martin straight to the point. “Are we a threat or something?”

“We might be, in the future. There are always those playing with the diabolical. And I don’t just mean the confused ramblings in the Bible.”

“They could have been on drugs Johann.” Max being contraire.

“That cannot be ruled out. But what if through these drugs, psychotropic of course elevated their minds into an alien resonance...if you get my drift.”

“Now that is freaky.” Max answered.

“Think of the occult of the Nazis. This in our century. The world was making great strides and along come these retards. Luckily they had Hitler.”

“Luckily? Coming from you?” Max surprised, holding his beer half way to his mouth.

“He lost the war for them.”

“Ah I see. Yes. Hm.”

“And this phenomena is recurring?” Martin asked tentatively.

“That is why we are here.”

### **Sumtek Monastery, Nepal**

It took some time for Bahnum Raman, meditating in front of the golden Buddha to achieve the trance state necessary to enter the mysterious black mandala. He felt lighter going opaque. Trying to flow past its inherent barriers ignoring the inconsequential effects of his surroundings in the special cell hallowed out of the ancient rocks beneath the monastery.

Practicing his unique Bombo shamanism. Delving into the tumultuous realms of the incessant mind knowing the good abbot, now his mentor having called together the monks to chant protective spells in the great hall. The unique drone reaffirming so that his mind could centre itself with the effort to affect the transition.

Entering a realm very easily inimical to life. Whoever had created this artefact or used it certainly did not belong to Buddha consciousness. Its benevolent powers the abbot advised decidedly absent. Emptying his mind Bahnum searched for an opening.

With determined void breathing he glimpsed, eventually a land labouring under a burdensome oppression. Potent magical forces impregnating the lives of the people who could not resist this nefarious power which corrupted weaker minds. He could feel the narcosis sapping their will. Behind this ingress an alien resonating archimage.

With one exception. A woman. That he perceived clearly amongst the clouds of confusion emanating from the evil which hung over the land as a persistent fog. Bahnum relying on his trance self surmounting the potent obstruction. Tall, slender, of a lighter complexion, or irradiated from within by her own potency their eyes made contact. She willing him across. Around him despair rose from a blighted landscape.

She gave him hope. She was his momentary spirit guide to cross the abyss within the mandala. He savoured the precious moment of her contact, touching his mind forgetting for the moment Amithama masquerading as Adibuddha.

In a flash Bahnum realised this was no Buddha realm. Not even one of its minor hells. No wonder then that the inherent barriers in the mandalas were absent here. This was more of a gateway. He was relieved how easy it had been to arrive. He reminded himself he still had to be vigilant even if coming across had been achieved quicker than he anticipated.

Aware of a verdant field under a blighted sun. Something in the air made all this wrong. The result of a foul mind which subsumed this place reflecting its own distorted orientation.

The monastery no more. A dry grassy plain stretched towards the horizon. The clouds of confusion dissipated. Behind a massive purple mountain range capped by snowy peaks. That much was familiar. Nearby a pleasant stream gurgling amongst rocks. The woman important. He would have to find her people. Follow the stream. In the end some community would appear. The living needed water. It was the only choice he had. Bahnum started walking.

### **Vahnsin**

The sonorous cantrip chant wove a veiled tapestry around him. A presence, its searching mind otherworldly cloaked by its own web of power invasively deep within him. With a rush of foreboding Zohex woke. The intelligence revealed in the dream faded into a vague adumbration, then it was gone. Receding back beyond the periphery of his mind, of his empire. A fiendish entity had nearly broken through.

Shaken he lay there for some moment gathering his wits. The dream more than just illusion. More like a premonition of disquieting moment.



Merina his current mistress lay curled next to him. Her soft supine body, her silken brown skin enhanced her sublimeness as she lay entangled amongst the animal skins and silken sheets of the royal bed.

Zohex looked at her with lust. But the memory of the dream was too persistent quenching the burning desire. Still he could not help but admire her endearing nubile beauty exuding a delectable refreshing youthfulness. However the vision allayed any thoughts of further sensual delights.

Hurriedly he grabbed his royal garments dressing quickly. Nervously fingering his precious amulet, a sinister gleaming stone of misty green wrought in strange entwining patterns of shining silver the memory returned to the impregnating vision which was beginning to haunt him. As he left the chamber Merina stirred restlessly but remained asleep.

The corridor was hung with tapestries of dizzying forms and glaring colours. He was walking past arresting ornaments embellished with arabesque designs which trapped the eye in convoluted images that uncannily etched themselves upon the unwary soul perceiving them.

Zohex stormed past waiting servants entering the great hall where rising suitors and warrior chieftains awaited his pleasure. They wore for the court their grotesque facial jewellery embellishing their harsh sadistic faces. Portraying the unmistakable expression of the unhinged. Zohex oblivious to all and sundry marched out into the open courtyard filled with the stench of animals. The place was littered with wine casks, cases of provisions and booty pillaged from raids. He heard of the moans of groups of enchained captives strung out before him.

What a miserably lot these renegades were he thought with distaste as squawking chickens scattered away from his purposeful stride. Sows, cows and donkeys roamed the courtyard full of plunder his chieftains had taken as tribute from the vermin he had finally subdued. The Dravidians and their allies would never have the strength again to even consider a skirmish against his Turanian warlords. Their puny gods annihilated and their pathetic priests put to the sword then sacrificed according to the ancient custom of his race.

He was beginning to feel better. Surveying his bastion, his citadel he smiled with a deep sense of satisfaction. Confiding in the omnipotence of his dark god and protector Ahriman Zohex and his priests had been guided well in the placement of his castle. Constructed by the sweat and blood of thousands of labouring captives it had arisen to become the mighty fortress of Vahnsin, squatting imperviously upon the mountain top at the roof of the world. Reached only by a narrow winding easily defended path that clung precariously along the tall granite walls making his centre of power impregnable. Here Zohex with his evil overlord and secret guardian Ahriman ruled the mountains and the plains of the south as Ahriman's diabolical presence sapped the fading resistance of his vanquished enemies. But for those who became his acquiescent servants he infused through secret arts the will and determination for them to do his will: conquer all, utterly, totally and ruthlessly thereby manifesting Ahriman's inviolate power over his vast expanding realm.

Dug into the towering mountain to which the citadel clung he entered the cavernous precinct of the Temple of Ahriman. Once inside supported by huge engraved columns Zohex proud and noble diminished in stature as he ventured into the colossal fane. Above a misty radiance glowed from rare crystals illuminating the mighty pillars of

the inner temple. Continuing far into the earth he stopped before a dark entrance to a smaller chamber. Listening attentively he heard the distant hissing of the temple's real serpentine guardians duplicated in stone at the outer entrance. Here he could smell their ancient foulness taking delight, his eyes sparkling in the frenzied turmoil of his own anticipation. Except that the dream still disturbed him.

He descended the time worn stairs leading into the sacred chamber of the high temple priest. He bowed in front of a small adamite altar, a raised circular dais of solid stone smoothly glistening in the stygian darkness.

A shadowy figure welcomed him as was fitting. They both felt the ground tremble as the beasts above moved in their caverns of the adytum. For a moment Zohex imagined the flickering fire atop the sacrificial black altar where screaming victims were butchered with blood lusting delight and thrown like refuse to the crawling ophidian guardians.

Merduk sat silently silhouetted by the dark aura emanating from below the open dais. His face a disquietening shadow. Zohex enjoyed the pretence of being human.

"You have come about the dream." Merduk said casually.

"You know?" Zohex hissed. Disliking Merduk's powers of premonition.

Merduk merely nodded. A trace of facetiousness in his eyes.

In the silence they focussed not upon each other but upon the raised dais encased in occult symbols, testimony of their dominion over the chaotic powers which only vigilance held at bay. This artifice edged between the realm of the abysmal depths of this planet and the realm of the cosmos above. Continually drawing upon both powers reinforcing the citadel and Zohex. Paying obsecence to the invisible presence the culmination of Ahriman they sat in holy silence for a moment before continuing.

“I have witnessed what has troubled you.” Merduk ventured calmly. Having cloaked his mind regarding the sentient presence which had dared to cross the threshold. Not Shaviscara whose army Zohex had trapped in ruined Tellurium, nor any of the minor warlords still free. Someone from the future. The threshold had indeed been breached but not the way Zohex saw it. He was slowly enmeshing himself in this reality or maybe this reality was snaring Zohex. Merduk knew which was enough.

“What do you suggest.” Came the terse reply.

“You tell me.”

“I was on a hill,” Zohex began touching his amulet haphazardly, “overlooking my army which had camped there for the night. It was early morning and we were to engage those snivelling Dravidians when for some inexplicable reason there appeared a woman. A second image imposed over her, another resonance within, someone other accompanying her. And that is what bothers me Merduk. Some presence in alignment with her.”

Merduk remained silent. This certainly was not what he expected. There seemed to be more going on than just the ingress from the future. Not that he cared much whether Zohex succeeded or not. Here was not important. He had been inside the lilac incomplete sphere in a distant galaxy, aware of its multi-dimensional portals unto potential-actual realities. This was but one of them. Not one he would have chosen but then he was not Zohex. That mind was twisted.

He had mind drifted. Zohex’s eyes glared at him in frustration. But he calmed himself and continued: “She asked if I believed in the power of Ahura, god of light, so called divine creator of all that exists in the cosmos. I laughed for the cosmos is much greater than their silly gods reveal to them. Her will made me look over my resplendent

army gathered around me. With eyes of fire she indicated merely by the motion of her hand for me to observe what she had come to show. I remember seeing the sun hovering dimly over the shadowed mountains when to my astonishment the sun brightened in intensity and my faithful Turanian soldiers bowed, bowed Merduk to this luminescence. And then she laughed because the sun became blindingly bright. The fields and trees on fire. My soldiers were running in agonising screams for their clothes were ablaze. The horses maddened with pain run amok as the intensity increased until men and beast were burnt to charred cadavers. The woman seemed satisfied and I awoke. But as I said, she seemed guided by another intelligence. One I feel has recently arrived.”

Thermonuclear Merduk thought. The idea coming just like that. Future weapons in the past or present? Premonition or predetermination? Instead Merduk pretended to be gravely stricken by Zohex’s intuition. To stop him from even getting close to what the dream really signified he asked instead: “Can you describe this woman?” staring into the dim obelisk of pure dark light. Dark matter. Drawn from the earth. Mystifying.

“She was robed in nondescript garments. Her jet black hair bound by a circlet of gold. Her arched brow paid justice to her noble face. But her eyes. Deep, infinitely so. A creature from another race, another time, another place.”

Decisions. Merduk in a quandary. Since their arrival Zohex had changed. The reality here so potent, or was that Zohex’s resonance that he was unknowingly weaving himself into this reality. If someone had indeed come over from the future, given the reality they had chosen in that lilac sphere to enter then the ingress should be of no consequence. That it had occurred was now fact. In a way, if Zohex was entrapping himself here would mean that he, Merduk would have access to the sphere out in that distant galaxy. Best to see what developed. And what would somebody from the future

want in this forsaken hole? To keep Zohex off balance Merduk suggested: “It is a prophetic dream. You must seek this woman. She has power.” She certainly heard that, thermonuclear power at that.

“I will send out messengers.”

“There is more my lord.” Merduk enjoying the charade. “I have ascertained,” for it was within the reality chosen by Zohex, “in the eastern lands that Shaviscara, whose army you have destroyed and the Dravidians, who rule over the southern continent have united. You must extinguish what could be a divine revolt. If she has this power and you do nothing then it is over.” That should keep Zohex busy. Then he might be able to trace this solitary invader. “It could well be you have reached the limits of your own sphere.” Wishing he had phrased this differently.

“I feed Ahriman captives so that He may be strong.”

Yes Merduk thought, that is unfortunate. If Ahriman exists. He hoped not.

“I see a pattern here Zohex. It seems for you to expand you need new captives to feed Ahriman. Otherwise your opponents gain in strength.”

“Take the woman. Yes.”

Not what Merduk had meant. Zohex was losing it. Good.

“Strike at the Dravidians thus confusing Shaviscara. Make him think he is of no consequence. Deal with him when I have consolidated my realm.”

Which brought to mind what might occur if Zohex was victorious. Nothing was impossible now that Merduk understood Zohex being central via the orb of all possibilities. Time to disorientate Zohex a little.

Merduk drew on the fount of dark matter pulsing into space. Of course. The orb was drawing in the energy from here. Inhaling Earth’s dark matter. Thus weakening this

planet's resonance whilst strengthening whatever reality Zohex desired. Something even, though they both had originated at Prima, Merduk was uncertain about. With the link established there was no reason for Zohex to not let anything get in the way of creating his reality here. Time for some disinformation.

Concentrating on the disturbing mythology of the Turanians Merduk conjured shapeless monsters drawn from the dark matter exuding out of the bowels of the earth. Metamorphosing through his will they assumed sinister cloaken forms, misshapen crawling things their limited intelligence twisted, twisting the forces of nature into chaos. Mountains crashed, crumbled, the atmosphere poisoned, nature's powers dislocated as the wrath of madness descended. Earth aborting nature. The wrath of Ahriman denied.

Zohex flinched from the flickering vision of terrestrial doom.

Now he would be desperate to serve this Ahriman, this nightmare god.

Maybe Ahriman would embrace Zohex. As for the visitor from the future Merduk hoped Zohex's premonition there would bury itself amongst his other manias.

The longer Bahnum wandered downstream the more he felt the innate presence of this land. Unlike his world here lingered vestiges, potent psychic entities not unlike the remnant souls he had met on previous shamanistic journeys. He was familiar with these beings. Even in their dreadful cast of mind. Yet here they held back. Not expectant, more indifferent. So far so good.

The idyllic surroundings masked something unfathomable. A disquiet he dared not engage further. Cautious for the aura permeated the landscape. Dark forests with ancient devastated horrors. Not dead yet. His destination impregnated with dismal mental chasms, lingering insipid minds.

Judging by the position of the sun he knew he was travelling west. After several days of journeying, surviving on fruit and berries Bahnum wondered if he was ever to meet any living soul here. Burdened by unseen disturbances everywhere. The spirit of the dead seemed out of proportion to the living. Their residue impregnating the land with an oppression that bordered on the edge of the psychic hells encountered when delving into Buddhist hells. He was not frightened, such beings were merely potent obsessed minds but it was a burden to keep their insidious presence at bay. It could complicate matters in trying to find the vanished rinpoche.

Taking a rest beneath the shade of a copse of trees along the river he tried to dispel these dark thoughts. The towering grey mountains to the right. The source of his irritations. Amongst the snowy peaks a small jagged black outcrop of rock. A citadel. The lines too strait to be anything else. Feeling the evil emanating surrounding it as if it were the repository of the dead. An artificial cavernous tomb where life was extracted for nefarious designs. He felt repulsion, a healthy sign. Identified he concentrated on ignoring it. He would not let it possess him.

Still a shiver travelled down his spine, into the earth and was gone. Had it travelled up into his head he would have been in trouble. Momentarily cleansed. Then he sensed life. Some distance on a grassy knoll a figure watched him silently. How long he had been observed, busy with riding his mind of the unwholesome energies so abundant here he could not ascertain.

The person was clothed in a simple dark garment, a hood offering protection against the elements. Calmness surrounding the figure. Approaching him slowly Bahnum rose. The face though in shadow appeared not dissimilar. So he was still in central Asia.

An aged man.



“We were made aware of your coming.” He simply said.

Nor was Bahnum surprised. Obviously this person was aware, familiar. Knowledgeable in his way and that of Bahnum’s. Greetings as such unnecessary.

“I am glad.”

“These are dangerous times. We thought it imperative to guide you to sanctuary. There are others who would take an interest in your presence.” Casting his gaze towards the distant mountains. So that citadel Bahnum had sensed was real. Their eyes met, recognition.

“Forgive me. I am Sarum of Elburz. Guardians of the eternal fire, the sun which reveals life.” Keeping it short.

“A noble cause. And much more I expect. I am Bahnum from a distant monastery.” No point getting theomorphic here. “There is one who may have crossed over. It is him I seek.” Wondering how far back in time, or into the future he was.

A semblance of a smile passed over Sarum’s face. “Come, we cannot linger here. Zohex will be aware of your presence and I feel your safety would be imperilled.”

Bahnum followed Sarum heading into the woods towards the first of many smaller ridges. Towards the mountains where the retreat they were heading for was positioned. By sunset covered in sweat, dust and dirt they began the climb towards the precarious precipice. Walking in his trance state Bahnum kept up with Sarum. A remarkable being. Maybe even an entity belonging to this realm.

They entered what Sarum called the Ravine of Deception. Under watching eyes they could disorientate those who approached with evil intentions. So there were enemies at large. Sarum did not explain. Some time later, making their way along a stone strewn

narrow path carved out of the towering mountains they entered a tunnel. The Jaws of the Dragon as Bahnum testily followed Sarum who was sure footed. After a while a dim grey light indicating the end of the tunnel. Exiting the dark passage Bahnum saw a verdant valley surrounded by stark rock walls. The setting sun's golden rays bathing the radiant splendour the citadel of Elburz.

Angled walls of monolithic rocks soared towards the fading light. A sense of overt might pervaded this sculpted valley with its terraces growing their food. Weirs and small dams accumulating snow fed reservoirs. Protruding towers rose out of chiselled foundations. The citadel itself of many levels descending into the misty depression where passageways led one into subterranean depths. A sunken square. Its dark grey walls spoke of mute strength, immense might, hidden wisdom cloaked in blank secrecy.

People moved amongst the outer edifice dwarfed by the architecture. Sarum motioned for Bahnum to follow him through a passageway into a rock wall. Again total darkness which did not impede Sarum's steady footsteps. Bahnum's eyes adjusted to an opaque light diffused through the labyrinth. Cloaked figures made silent way for them. Then they were in a chamber. At its centre an oval table and tall backed solid wooden chairs. The light above filtering through for the ceiling glowed absorbing Sarum informed him the sunlight above then passing it through unique crystals to be diffused below.

They turned into another passageway.

"You may rest if you wish," though Sarum seemed inexhaustible, "we can talk tomorrow."

"I feel fine. A couple of hours walking is good exercise and always pleasant recreation." Bahnum was fit.

“Then we can meet this evening. You of course are our guest. I will show you where you can refresh yourself. We have clean clothes for you in your own chamber.” Sarum leading the way.

His place of rest a cell. He could smell fresh water and was shown the bathroom. A stream was pouring down from an opening in the ceiling draining through the floor to be used for irrigation. On racks were grey towels. Sarum vanished momentarily and returned with a change of apparel then retreated. Bahnum had a refreshing shower and the change of attire made him feel, cold water aside, reinvigorated. Finished with his ablutions he rejoined Sarum in the smaller antechamber.

“Come with me to your cell.” Bahnum wondering how much he should reveal to this kind sage. He might even need their help to locate the missing rinpoche.

His abode was sparsely furnished. A palette covered in animal furs. Two small chairs, a brass lamp hung from the ceiling and the window overlooking a courtyard. He was located at the bottom of a deep sunken quadrangle. Dark grey walls rising around him.

“We will honour you at the meal.” Sarum began tentatively adjusting his robe. “You mentioned on our journey one who had come from your time. The Elders are aware of the arrival. But to other matters. The land to the north is ruled by a homicidal maniac known as Zohex. Entrenched in his fortress at Vahnsin. Recently arrived just like you.” Considering Bahnum. Letting him wonder at the coincidence. “It may be he is the one you seek. If that is so you are putting yourself in great danger.”

Bahnum considered this. It could well be so. That the rinpoche had been an impostor who had potent psychic powers at his command which he mentioned.

“It might be unwise to allow him to return then. We will find a way to curtail his gruesome activities.” Sarum to Bahnum’s surprise at ease.

“I need to trace this entity.” Knowing he was more than just human. “Then either contain him,” meaning here, “or draw the poison out of his mind.”

“You may not need to do even that.” Sarum said assured. “He could be a duplicate, a shadow, a ghost. An agent in your time. Now that the ghost made the transition carrying whatever information it had, having been deposited, drawn, called forth its objective over it would have dissipated. Your entity no more.”

“You are certain?” something Bahnum had not considered.

“We have lost it. Unless it has continued on to another realm. But that which had crossed over has vanished. I can think of no other reason.”

“Could it have cloaked itself into another guise?”

“Its resonance would continue. There is nothing Bahnum to indicate that.”

“I thank you for your frankness. So this unstable ruler, Zohex?”

“Yes.” Sarum considered. “Escaped from Tellurium as it crashed rent asunder by nature’s powerful forces. Then transition jumped here by several thousand years. With a companion who seems the opposite. Barely there. His resonance not so much weak as in control. One by the name of Merduk. Zohex is the primary threat. A bloodthirsty warlord bent on extending his influence of this vast land.”

“But you are secure here?”

A thin smile played on Sarum’s lips. “We are not without power. But it is diametrically opposed to Zohex’s. However the signs in the stars reveal a hidden disturbance. Potent minds scheming. They may even be in contact with Zohex. The

amount of power he possesses is unearthly, unnatural, determined and catastrophic. As if he is willing destruction to manifest itself by design. Either his or alien intelligences.”

“Non earthly realms?” Bahnum guessed thinking of the realities mandalas represented.

“Most certainly. Zohex had tried to penetrate our defences, without success.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” For these people here seemed to be pertinent to this younger earth’s history.

“Mainly through negative sorcery. Needless to say we made sure they dug their own demise.”

Bahnum had the impression of chanting priests united as one forcing the issue here. Assailed by a darkness, a nothingness which could not be negated. Hiding fearful gibbering inanities focussed into a madness descending upon them. Eviscerating the wizard priests excoriated by a daemonic fear the Elders here crafted so that the madness infected all of the invaders. The attack repulsed.

Sarum watching. Letting Bahnum search his mind.

From this humiliation Zohex sent forth his tribal chieftains who pillaged, ravished and murdered those who had not as yet sworn allegiance to him. For Bahnum it was enough. The Elders here were secure as was the territory around them. Vahnsin was another matter. A blight upon the land. And in league with a dark god: Ahriman. A creation of alien minds or a sinister god in his own right? The trouble with gods were even thinking of them gave them strength. Bahnum voided the disturbing vision.

Sarum nodded.

Bahnum said: “This evil contagion personified by Zohex seems to be spreading its tentacled vampiric thralldom to the west. Ensnaring vast plains who had never had reason

to fear such an unhinged ruler. Yet,” Bahnum trying to get the lay of this land psychically, he cannot move much further south.” Looking at Sarum’s steady gaze who told him that was their doing, “nor east...”

“Yes. East. The dark archimage Shaviscara whose armies Zohex lured to fallen Tellurium. Since then he has withdrawn. Scheming no doubt.” Sarum glad. “At least you are who you appear to be.”

“And what is that?” Bahnum amused.

“Our honoured guest. One who can travel at will.”

“I am thankful for the kindness shown.”

Sarum acknowledged the compliment in silence. “I will let you rest now and return well after sunset. Given our journey I think we can wait a little.”

Bahnum bowed his head in thanks. When he looked up Sarum was gone.

The vision of Zohex’s rule continued to resound in the back of his mind. The nightmare would, by this fiend created be diluted here due to their unassailable potent shaped energies. Not by calling upon minor gods. Just energy. Swirling around this centre of calmness poisonous decay, apocalyptic dreams of manic oppression. Drawing upon the souls of the sacrificed to enhance Zohex and his evil priesthood’s demented, deranged, deluded riven souls.

Absorbed into Zohex’s orbit. A bleak land. Foreboding and sinister shrouded by thunderous clouds. Ferocious winds swept down from above bending and breaking trees as they crashed in the ancient forest. Standing on a platform of diluvian stone inscribed by mystic runes a dark figure, featureless stood their ground as the elements raged. Bahnum guessing this was the author of the violence. It a dark glowing fire flaming around it. Some hellish god of the Buddhist pantheon. Here? Its immanence trying to

penetrate his presence. Within its distorted mind a crawling terror exuding shapeless blasphemies groping slowly their way towards him. It the vanished rinpoche. Resurrected, incarnated in a real it was trying to lay over the land chosen to accomplish some heinous act. Deep rolling thunder, the thick broiling clouds shot through by brilliant flashes of fierce crackling lightning.

Another figure, more slender bathed in transparent flames. The air flickering around her. On her dark head a circle of lustrous gold. Of noble bearing. Turning towards him! Ignoring the creature.

The motionless darkness wound its foulness around her. She collapsed in this ebon gloom. The winds screaming with unnatural energy obliterating by sound the vision of her within this tempestuous fury.

Bahnum standing where the woman had been. Was he next? The storm raging around him for he was at its epicentre. Above the firmament with countless stars. A place of power. The woman not just a figure but a process. The mad entity was nowhere. Nowhere. Just like the woman. Two Bardo states intersecting. With calamitous results. He remaining to pick up the proverbial pieces.

Seeing Sarum. Bahnum blinked. In his cell. Sarum seemed to understand.

Somehow a conflict had been enacted. The trouble as always was where exactly? The past, the present or the future. Neither effigies had been dominant to overcome each other's antipathy. Bahnum stepping in when it was all over. That at least was a good sign.

"We await your pleasure." Was all Sarum said.

Sarum led through intricate passageways which were anything but linear once they had left the living and guest quarters. Bahnum felt the protective spells which

appeared to emanate from the huge towers of which he saw only their solid base. Radiating cogent forces shrouded in utter secrecy and eternal silence. Potent. Finally arriving at the banquet hall. A resplendent hall draped in rich curtains. At the centre of the rectangular room a raised dais, empty. As mysterious as its inhabitants with whom Bahnum felt at ease. Not so different to the monastery he had left so recently. Decorated with fresh flowers and incense holders in small cavities along the bare rock grey wall. So far they were the only ones present. A tall chair at the head of the table reserved for the abbot who would be with them shortly. Bahnum to his left, Sarum to the right. Taking their seats at the still bare table monks appeared, all in grey moving quietly to their seats. No more than a dozen.

Novices Bahnum assumed came with the food on silver platters and bowls. The candles duly lit on the table giving the gathering a festive cheer. It promised to be a sumptuous feast as lamb, chicken, game, vegetables, fruit were brought in. Then came their silver plates, silver knives and forks, very civilised. They were either very well off or they had gone to a lot of trouble for him.

A small man appeared dressed as the others in grey. He walked serenely without undue acknowledgement towards the empty pedestal first bowed, mumbled something then sat. Introducing himself as Kathan. His face though aged had none of its ravages. Smooth skin, bright black eyes, a calm smile reminding Bahnum of that of the Buddha. Asking Bahnum if he was rested. Bahnum thanked him for the courtesy extended to his humble self. He was but a traveller. The abbot pleased motioned for Bahnum as guest of honour to serve himself first. Seeing a brown soup, lentils he ladled some of the aromatic concoction into his silver bowl then handed it on to the Kathan who only served himself a minute portion.



They ate in silence, all relishing the good food. When they finally were enjoying the fresh fruit, washed down with mountain water did Bahnum decide to say something.

“This morning I was in my monastery and now I am here.” Still amazed at his transition into a mandala realm that was more real than any he had ventured into as a shaman.

“And this monastery is where?” Kathan asked more for conversation.

“Near a very tall mountain range in central Asia.”

When Kathan merely nodded Bahnum added: “In the future, I think.”

“And your reason?”

Bahnum wondered of Sarum had informed Kathan of his reason.

“I believe someone potent entered our mandala. My superior thinks this does not bode well. I have come to find him and return with him. But Sarum thinks he may have been a ghost, a simulation, an entity masquerading in human form. As to its intent I have no idea.”

“You mention a mandala. We too use them to explore what is around us.”

Bahnum comprehending Katham referring to mind states which under very exceptional circumstances can create their own realms, their own realities.

“And you think,” turning to Sarum, “that this entity is dispersed?”

“Most certainly abbot.” Sarum answered.

“Well Bahnum, now that your quarry has disappeared will you return?”

“I suppose so though I had a strange vision.”

“The woman.”

Bahnum was not too surprised. They were no beginners here.

“Yes.”

“And you left standing. Think you can guess its portent?”

“In a way.” Bahnum not too uncertain. “Two interceding realms. The woman either retreated or was subsumed. But with that act the practitioner who engaged this woman too retreated or was dissipated. My own presence would indicate that somehow I am involved in this psychic struggle that has manifested itself in my mind.” Not wishing to add that it could also be real. Soon.

“It appears that you have indeed been chosen. That you were meant to be here. The entity guiding you here could well have been exactly that.”

“A guide?”

“Perhaps.” The abbot not too intrigued. “Something for you to ponder. Do you wish to return?”

“I assume so your holiness.”

“You could be of invaluable help.”

“Me?” Now he really was surprised.

“Why not?”

“Yes.” Bahnum considered. “Doing what?”

“Find that woman. Protect her. Remove her from the web woven around her which could jeopardise her life.”

“Soul saviour.”

“Yes.”

Bahnum was guessing. The abbot knew who this person was. Both probably. A conflict on the making. One the woman might loose. Bahnum to the rescue. He smiled at that. The least he had expected.

“Amusing?”

Bahnum getting used to the abbot reading his mind. Sarum paid attention but contributed little.

“Most certainly. The land is vast. She could be anywhere.” His mind comfortable that his mission had changed. If he could help he would. These people here had according to them protection.

“Sarum will point you in the right direction.”

So they did know.

“Can you tell me,” pushing the tray of fruit away, he was full, “anything that might be of help?”

“No. But rest assured it’s not as bleak as that.”

Sarum’s eyes flickered momentarily.

“Well perhaps a little.”

Sarum frowned.

“More than a little.”

Sarum attentive.

“Zohex who rules at Vahnsin came here by not dissimilar means. Transporting himself and his companion into our time, our reality. What we have done to deserve this we cannot fathom. A mystery. Since then there has been nothing but discord. The speed with which Zohex not just established himself but carved out his domain was uncanny. A potent being. One that might not even be human.”

Bahnum understood. Whether this was an ancient reality or a state of the mandala was inconsequential. Zohex was real. Psychologically dangerous. A demon on the loose. One that obviously had to be sent back, neutered or destroyed. If Bahnum could be

instrumental, if the woman was linked to the endeavour then he would stay. He said as much to Kathan.

“Destiny is fated. We will do what we can to protect you from the ravages of Zohex’s deranged mind. His wizard priests are less of a problem. More an interference. If you can bring this woman here.”

“She must be important.”

“She is the last ruler who is free. The last kingdom between that foul scourge at Vahnsin and us.”

“That precarious?”

“Luckily to the south are the Dravidians. Zohex has skirted us and made some initial raids there. Their land and their gods too potent to be easily subsumed. But rest assured he has designs upon her lands. They are fertile and rich. And as I said. The last free territory between Vahnsin and us.”

“What is her name? How will I identify her?”

“Bahnum.” Kathan chided him gently. “You have seen her.”

“She was rather indistinct.”

“You have sensed her presence.”

“Yes that is so.”

“That is enough. If I were to mention her name one of Zohex’s intelligencers might also be made aware that you wish to meet her and bring her to safety.”

“This I understand.”

“When you have rested properly, then you, if you so wish, can begin your journey. Do you wish to do this?”

“I do.” Bahnum certain of his decision. Not exactly to plan but given the horror of Zohex and his minions gaining power here he felt he had to do this.

Bahnum had been escorted by Sarum to the north. Leading him in the right direction after the Elders had located psychically the probable location of the woman who was somehow inextricably woven into his mind. That they were destined to meet was beyond doubt. Given the precarious situation on the ground Bahnum was ideally placed to make contact as an independent individual. One whom the Elders respected if only through his feat of travelling through mandala realms. With no need they assured him of needing a replicated mandala for in essence it was within his mind. If he maintained his inner strength he could return to his world anytime. They would not hold it against him should he choose to abandon the quest.

Wandering with some provisions under familiar constellations of stars. The Elders had warned him Zohex served Ahriman, god of anti-light. Bahnum wondered as he lay under the canopy of stars whether that entity was real or some confabulation serving Zohex’s madness. Bahnum reminded himself to be vigilant against even powerful illusions woven by occult minds.

Days later he entered a pleasant valley. It would not be long until he would meet fellow humans. To the north rolling verdant slopes, vast forests covered the hills. The mountains barely rising behind the tree crowns. Behind the massive brown walls of the Elburz mountains. In between the small river he had been following gurgling merrily along. Small fields of yellow corn waving in the gentle warm breeze. The wind creating patterns in the rich thick carpet of grass interlaced with an abundance of wild flowers. To think the peace here was so fragile. That inimical forces were at work to destroy this

serenic bliss. Birds chirped, the scent of bountiful nature lulling him into serene reflection. A sparkling day as he made his way through nature's bounty. A rustle nearby. Just rodents scavenging.

He bent near the stream to drink of its fresh waters. Then sat under a shady old tree watching the sparkling sunlight on the pleasant river.

A figure appeared on the other side of the rocky rivulet, squeezed into rushing waters by huge boulders. A woman in grey long flowing robes. Tall, slender unaware of Bahnum's presence she approached the stream carrying a clay pitcher. He must be near a settlement hidden behind the hills. Startled birds shrieked flying upwards amongst tall trees.

It was her. Having filled the pitcher she placed it under wound cloth upon her head and only then did she notice Bahnum on the other side of the narrow river. Bahnum was speechless. Her dark eyes charged with hidden energies looked without concern his way. He rose waving in a friendly gesture.

"Who lives in this pleasant vale?" Bahnum nearly tripping amazed at the resemblance of his vision.

"It is the valley of the patriarch Vargen." She answered easily. Rodents scuttled in the undergrowth. Above birds squawked.

"Who is this noble leader?" wanting to keep her engaged. She was so graceful Bahnum realised that he seemed to be losing his sense of reason.

"You must be a stranger to these parts. Do you seek refuge? These are dangerous times." Her eyes misted over mingled with sadness. Regaining her composure she continued: "Vargen is the guardian of the sacred fire. My name is Mudhan and you noble traveller?" her face glowing radiant challenging the splendour of the heavens.

“My name dear lady is Bahnum.” Telling her he was from the future not important just yet.

She seemed to sense his presence as if trying to remember where she might have seen him. His heart touched by her sweetness. A pure soul. The rustling in the long grass drew closer. Then her dark eyes widened in fright as several warriors emerged from the surrounding shrubs. Casting in an instant a net over Mudhan. Her sublime form collapsed in defeat onto the flowers and soft green grass. The pitcher fell and broke into shards. A mighty blow sent Bahnum reeling as a thousand sparks exploded in his brain with night descending prematurely.

Waking to a throbbing head. Shrieking in pain he felt the back of his head matted in sticky blood. Trying to move he was violently ill emptying his stomach with a searing skull and eyes streaming. Followed by a thumping headache beating in unison with his pulse. He crawled back under the tree, spots dancing within his eyes. The sunlight on the grass painful, closing them. He felt awful trying to understand what had occurred. Then felt an emotional pang his heart having been touched by the woman of his vision. Captured by bandits. Well organised bandits who were specifically after her. Of significance then. He breathed deeply, his head a little less painful. He walked unsteadily to the rivulet, washed out his mouth and dunked his head in the searing ice cold water. The back of his head smarting.

He crossed the stream feeling a little better indifferent to getting wet. The hamlet was just beyond the rise huddled around a pond. Children gathered shrieking with delight sensing he was not a messenger of doom. But he was. A small crowd of elderly locals sat watching him silently in front of their mud brick houses. Falling silent as he wandered

into the village square. Their eyes wary some muttering amongst themselves. The children aware of the adults apprehension fell silent.

A message written on animal hide was posted onto one of the doors of a cottage. Most of the able bodied men and women were in the fields. The old folks were perturbed hiding their agitation.

And no wonder. The message brutally clear. Zohex King of the Turanian Aryans summoned the Elders to pay tribute and recognise him as their undisputed ruler. Failure to comply meant retribution. Why the woman had been captured. A hostage.

The elderly were looking past Bahnum their eyes averted. He heard footsteps, people approaching. Some of the urchins ran towards their parents. The villagers returning from the fields wondering no doubt what he, the stranger wanted or what portents he threatened to bring upon them. Not knowing the sad news he carried in his bosom.

One sagely patrician dressed as they all were in dirty garb approached Bahnum.

“I am Vargen. We bid you peace.” Holding the scythe easily.

“I wish I could wish you the same.” Bahnum replied gravely. He had not noticed the flecks of blood on his tunic. He felt dizzy again, steadying himself his head throbbing. Then he lost his footing blacking out.

Opening his eyes. In a simple mud hut covered with a thatched roof. A dim light burnt somewhere barely illuminating the room he found himself in. Lying on a straw pallet his head aching. A young man said something to someone out of sight. Vargen appeared concern etched on his grave face.

“Who sent you?” his only words.



“The abbot of Sumtek.” Bahnum replied automatically. Not that it mattered. She was gone. He felt wretched probably concussed. Wondering if he should return.

“Sumtek.” Vargen repeated the strange word. Then: “Whose domain?”

A wave of nausea washed through Bahnum. Breathing deeply to stop his stomach contracting.

“Then Elburz.” Feeling weak, helpless, depressed.

“Not Vahnsin then.” The word spat out like poison.

Bahnum made the mistake of shaking his head. He felt dizzy. Closing his eyes. The room spinning. A rapid conversation followed. Bahnum felt ill.

“You must rest stranger. I am sorry to put you through this but we are threatened by an evil enemy against which we would be totally helpless if it was not for the brotherhood of Elburz. Zohex comes closer with each passing season and we will soon be at his mercy if he is not destroyed.”

“I understand.” Sort of. “That is why I have come.” Maybe.

“To vanquish Zohex?” Vargen’s blue eyes wider with hope.

“No.” he relapsed.

“What then?” came the irritable reply.

“I am seeking his evil mentor whom we knew as Adibuddha. But he was an impostor assuming a cloak for something far more sinister.” The words coming automatically out of his head.

“Merduk perhaps?” Vargen suggested. The words like barbs. “Where is your land, your people? Across the sea or from beyond the northern waste?”

Bahnum took a deep breath and told Vargen the basics. Arriving at Elburz then here. His face furrowed in concentration.

“Then Bahnum Randa you are most welcome. We will care for you. You are lucky to be alive and it puzzles me why his barbarians let you live. Maybe to convey their might and put fear into our souls. But where were you before Elburz?”

“I came through a mandala at Sumtek. It is in the future.” There. He had said it. Dawning on him just how unique and unlike the mandala was. Perhaps the only one on earth. Could this artefact, so potent exist so surreptitiously. A gate which could have dire consequences if the reverse were to occur. Could Zohex transport himself into the twentieth century? He was faced with a problem. Should he finish what Zohex had begun, how quickly things shifted, or warn the abbot at Sumtek of the danger the mandala presented to all the future’s of the world?

“The future. You are certain? Only gods...”

“No Vargen. Not only gods. There are entities who could be invincible. Zohex perhaps one of them. Beyond the natural laws of the universe. Residing within time but not. Oh forgive me, I forgot. I met a lady by the name of Mudhan.”

“What of her?” the young man interjected.

“She was taken when I was attacked.”

A howl of despair burst from the young man.

“They were to be betrothed Bahnum. This is indeed a sad day for us.”

“I am sick of our weakness.” The young man in despair. “Let us join forces with the other tribes and take Vahnsin.”

“And fall in battle only to die?” Vargen asked his voice choked with emotion.

“There are still some who roam unmolested and freely over the open plains. They take to skirmishes which they win fighting when it is right.”

“Followed by their decimation when Zohex’s spawn trap them just as easily. Their numbers dwindle year by year.” Vargen answered sadly.

“At least they show that Zohex cannot subdue them.”

“That fiend has destroyed a huge land just to trap an army. You think you can match his sorcery?” Vargen aware of the fall of Tellurium.

“A different time. Zohex’s power cannot continue for ever father.”

“If Zohex is human certainly. But is he? Then there is his silent priest. Do not think I have not pondered Zohex and his situation. Wishing upon him a plague to whither his soul. Elburz are biding their time. They will let us know when the time is right. Let Bahnum attempt what he has set his heart upon.”

Putting him in a quandary. Kathan indicating his mysterious entity a ghost long dissipated. But the vision at Elburz regarding Mudhan changed everything. That they were intertwined in some higher resonance was beyond doubt. He would see what he could do. At least, he hoped, he could return. These people here were destined and fated to be where they were.

“Bahnum. What is your intention?”

“Seek Mudhan.” He simply said.

“As will I.” the young man determined. Bahnum preferred to go by himself.

“If Bahnum fails and by all the gods I wish him success then yes let us rouse ourselves out of our stupor in one valiant attempt to either destroy the malignancy at Vahnsin or die valiantly in the effort to rid us of this evil so that others after us will have the courage to wipe this venom from the pure earth.” Vargen spoke his words laden with sorrow.

Bahnum was touched by the humble sincerity of these people. His courage inflamed with a desire to succeed in what was destined even as the despairing melancholy of Vargen and his son overwhelmed him. The image of Mudhan. Her eyes full of love. So ruthlessly taken from her home and her kind people. Invigorated by their own trauma he swore by all the lords of creation in the infinite Buddhist realms a terrible vengeance on Zohex.

Before he sank exhausted into sleep Bahnum wondered how and why he had become the vehicle chosen for this impossible endeavour. Yet at the same time certain that down unlit and illimitable realms of terrible mad fantasies which was spawning Zohex's race he fervently hoped they would be caught in a sweeping shapeless demise driving them through their esurient nightmares to utter annihilation. As long as they were ignorant of the black mandala with which Zohex could threaten the very future Bahnum tried to save.

### **Varanasi, India**

Rana woke feeling tired. Savarna as usual sleeping peacefully undisturbed by her experience whence she had been possessed by a demon Rana was beginning to fear. Which he had no idea of knowing how to control. Looking at the ceiling worried Savarna was onto something he was not. For the moment he was thoroughly dejected. It did not seem fair. Here he was working with all his soul on a project in which they were both involved and yet it was Savarna who was achieving some kind of breakthrough which he was missing out on. It was intolerable.

He rose reluctantly. It was still early in the day but the pre-monsoonal heat was already rising. Returning from his morning shower he felt refreshed and a little restored. He went into the kitchen, made a pot of Darjeeling tea and waited for it to infuse its delicate fragrance whilst his thoughts returned to the divinely sought yet demonically

wrought promise coming through Savarna whence Kali had indicated the somewhat imprecise location of the magically revealed artefact.

The tea ready he poured himself a cup adding just the right amount of sugar to enhance and blend the two flavours. Sitting near the kitchen window drenched in the rising sun his gaze rested on the small shrine to Kali. He had no wish nor the energy to invoke another debilitating blood rite to win the favour of the goddess.

Just to think that he had traversed forbidden dominions with the gods, entered regions unknown to mortals, retrieving hidden archaic knowledge from long decayed ages. Normally this indulgence of reliving past successes made him feel almost super human but not today. He was depressed.

With a tiny spark stirring his self indulgent intellect. He remembered, sipping the hot beverage, trembling nearly spilling his tea the beatific vision Kali had granted: the revelation of the strange tablet. The key to his redemption hidden in that dark and distant underground crypt.

Rana momentarily startled. He could not remember having entered the library. His mind blanking out. Most unusual. A spell perhaps? His gaze turned to that section where parchments from Arabia and Persian, yellowed with age, ancient writings impenetrable to the ignorant now vied for attention to their testamental wisdom.

Absentmindedly for he could not focus for some obscure reason he searched through the volumes of ancient histories. His mind reaching into ages of fabulous mythologies, the birth of magic with its attendant advent of a distant aeon shrouded in timeless almost eternal darkness.

He sat behind the huge writing desk. Could it be that Savarna was homing in on the riveting truth? The vision pertinent. In some rocky chamber lay an ancient altar

relinquished by distant archimages hopefully forgotten. The glimmering imagery pertinent. He saw adepts placing the black tablet onto a sacred enclosure within the altar intoning the correct invocations to their gods so that with divine certainty they were granted fabulous power as it had once flowed in the seraphic blood of that distant race. In those lost vistas of entombed time godlike warriors and serpent priests had immersed themselves in irradiating empyrean splendour. Ruling triumphant over Asia. Emperors had bowed humbly before them in their crimson and purple robes. Priests offering precious sacrifices. The continent subduing those who resisted in daunting submission. This drove Rana and presumably Savarna onwards on their secret path irrevocably interwoven with their own crafted destiny. But progress was slow. Rana was beginning to regain his haughty composure.

Having reason to believe this tablet belonged to neither the Hindu or Buddhist pantheon. Representing an ante-cronian power long vanished from the face of the earth. Obliterated by time from human memory. Not his.

Having finished his tea he felt mentally refreshed. How subtle mood changes were. He reminded himself to ignore his minor depressions. Mental interferences of marginal importance if any at all. Rana felt he had at least arrived at a major juncture on this most noble pursuance.

Then a chill thought struck him. He heard Savarna praying at Kali's shrine. The chanting of her high pitched shrieks frightening him as it built into a frenzied crescendo waning as abruptly as it had burst forth. Sonorous vibrant ebbing syllables wafting away in decreasing rhythms of hypnotic tones.

Savarna sensed the presence. A powerful forceful potentially malign demon protecting the hidden vault which she wished to penetrate. Fearfully persistent she

decided to end the invocation thinking the time was premature to force the goddess for an answer. Checking her ingress and return the mind to normalcy disengaging Kali's enticing vision. Her concentration weak today. Rising reluctantly, bowing to the now silent goddess and entered the sunlit library.

She walked over to Rana's writing desk as he poured over the ancient stained musty manuscripts handing him a brown parcel which must have arrived yesterday. Startled he looked up at her, wishing her a good morning. She smiled back. He knew what it contained. With meticulous care he picked up an ornately carved silver dagger, split open the string and unwrapped the parcel. His face broke into a smile. Savarna moved closer.

"This is the pundit's translation of Chokamantra's version of the Akashic Records." Rana said excitedly. Savarna looked blankly at the book, the tarnished leather revealing nothing. "These are the old records of the invasion of India antedating the Aryan assault. This Savarna is supposedly the original race which held sway over much of Persia and Babylon all the way to Burma." He explained.

When Savarna remained mute he continued: "Vanishing with the rise of the Indo-Aryan intrusion. Disappearing as suddenly as they had emerged. I ordered it last year at the Delhi book fair. It might aid us in tracing what we seek." Pleased with himself. His mood of dejection evaporated.

With great care his soft tubby hands delicately opened the hard leather cover tainted by years of hibernation. Strange human forms amongst the cramped text. Wild fantasy infusing these beings with sinister forces creeping out of shadowed recesses. Savarna's breathing became laboured as she stared, fascinated by the odd and tantalisingly willed repugnant drawings. She trembled slightly then began to shake in



violent spasms. Rana watched mesmerised as her dilated eyes rolled upwards in unnatural gyrations, her skin a white shade of pale. Cold and shivering she collapsed in a swoon. Quickly he carried her light body to a couch littered with papers and essays which he hurriedly brushed onto the floor. Her breath becoming weak. The complexion sallow. Her eyes still rolling wildly oscillating profusely. He looked at the back of the book lying open at the page which must have had this tremendous effect upon her and bent closer to examine it.

Minutely detailed the copper print plate depicted an ancient race, haughtily assembled in a sculpted temple supported by gigantic columns which were embellished with intricate patterns of engraven hieroglyphs calling upon their secret gods. A company of warriors were standing brazenly with the sacerdotal priesthood who bestowed under the shadow of two huge serpents an unknown source of permanent horror. Behind them an obelisk altar firmly embedded in this mighty hall.

Savarna stirred deflecting Rana's wrapped attention of the disturbing drawing. The colour was returning to her face. Her thin lips parted with a weak smile, her eyes full of wonder, her breathing regular.

"You have been working too hard. Or was it something else?" he inquired anxiously sitting at the edge of the sofa holding her cool hand.

"I do not know." She said weakly her voice morbidly drained. "The picture felt distinctively alive. Piercing my heart with a dread giving no respite. An inherent fear rising towards me in successive waves." She closed her eyes. "Yes." She finally continued, "there stirred something deep within my soul. A perilous feeling of an unfathomable encroaching evil."

"And then?" he asked eagerly.

“At first darkness. Solemn, engulfing, a dim glow of something nasty which pervaded everything. The figures in the temple were its perpetrators reserving a nemesis for some unknown wrath watched by the baleful eyes of the priests. The atmosphere charged with an obdurate and dangerous pride mingled with a steadfast hatred. I know they could command psychic regions not known to others. Unleashing whirlwinds of terminal fires while the authors of these deeds remained inviolate and impassionate.” She fell silent. He looked at her distant brown eyes, her taut nervous face. She was staring into empty space.

Regaining his composure she took a breath and continued: “It all seemed so familiar.” Then waiting a while said: “It was the chamber of my vision.” Looking drawn. Exhausted she then fell asleep.

Rana decided to return to his desk with the potently charged book. As he picked it up a card fell out which bore the name of:

Abu-Jahals Bookshop

Antiquities & Ancient History

6/14 Connaught Circuit, New Delhi

Tel: 43-962

As he had ordered the book at the fair it was likely an agent had procured the copy for him. They had agreed to an outrageous price for which Rana had initially made a ten percent down payment of five hundred rupees in total. Now they wanted the difference. He decided to phone Delhi. The line crackled and hissed as Rana spoke to an assistant who informed him the master, as he was called was not available and would

return his call. Rana replaced the receiver and looked once more upon the strange scenes depicted in this musty volume.

These humans were from another time. He flicked over to another page. A misty lustre enshrouded a tall pillar vaulted hall from whence glowed dark crystals barely illuminating the precinct below. He avoided looking at the warriors. They made him shudder. He suspected the scene was somewhat stylised. It was the engraved hieroglyphs which made him gasp. They looked so familiar even though they were completely unknown to him. Could they be the same of his vision?

He turned more pages. There in the centre of a small vault a most singular column oddly shining in transfused darkness spread its aura in all directions. Its lustre mirrored small wraithlike and gargoylic images. A teeming confusion of swirling forms eddying through each other, creating illusions of chaotic harmony. This was a force whose discordance held sway over life itself.

Around the altar stood some men and women, clad in semi barbarian clothing. Brocades sparkled, rings glittered upon their satin like cloaks reflecting with unnatural brilliance the proud supplicants who strained their gaze not upon the officiating priest but towards his outstretched hands holding a rectangular object. It reminded him of the pseudo biblical Moses revealing the supposed ten commandments. But Rana was also fascinated by the raised altar stone. The tablet would no doubt be inserted into its strange stone carven receptacle. Thus they would somehow connect with their gods enhancing their turbidly diseased desires. This he guessed had to be the fabled pre Aryan, pre Dravidian and pre deluvian Turanains, one of the root races of the planet. But they had been mere myth. Could it be he and Savarna had stumbled across this fabled powerful race that had brought down Atlantis?

Eagerly he glanced over the wilted pages and found a calligraphic image of a serpent holding a pearl in its dragon fanged jaws. A fantastic picture of violent balance. Behind the serpent's tail stretched the stars. The gleaming pearl in its jaws he recognised as Earth. Wonderful! What a vision, what an ecstatic revelation! He had better read the book. He offered a quick prayer to Ganesh then made himself comfortable at his desk to pour over the tome. Savarna was sleeping peaceably. The opening paragraph was nothing less than an ominous warning:

*'Seeker remember Fate which pursues you to the End.  
Break the bonds of fearful prophecies though Fear  
will visit itself upon you drawing near a great  
Confusion and Destruction abandoning that which  
remains in cowering Remnants of your Sanity. Blood  
will flow from Dark Space and with words of Dissention  
I will rage like a fire spawned by the depths of blasted  
Oblivion. Then will you see your Destiny, then will I  
give myself unto you.'*

Rana hastily shut the book. He was not ready for this.

## West Berlin

Parking his beat up Volkswagen in the underground garage of the 'Brandenburger Versicherungsgesellschaft's' building Johann Brauner was relieved to escape the hot summer weather. The five storey cement office block refreshingly cool as he walked towards the lift. Located at Edinburger Strasse it overlooked the Schiller Park. The better end of Wedding. To the right a local school the rest of the block taken up by the maintenance workshops for the municipal trams. As such no one paid much attention to the comings and goings in the area.

Wedding had been a red working class district during the troubled Weimar Republic. Then in the final phases of the war the Allies turned it into rubble. It was the best thing that happened to the place for the slightly less damaged apartments had been rebuilt according to their original design. The worst of the nineteenth century tenements gone for ever.

Johann entered the well appointed office of his long time friend and solicitor Kurt Metzger. Johann lean and thin, approaching sixty moved the palm of his hand over his thinning grey hair. Kurt, stout and portly and balder than a tonsured monk rose to greet him his eyes sparkling good natured amiability.

Both had led interesting and dangerous lives. Johann had fled Nazi Germany. Confining to his friend that this political movement was a rising morbid disease which seem to capture the collective psyche of its doomed people. Once in England he had worked in an unofficial capacity for British Intelligence advising Churchill's inner sanctum about the peculiar workings of the Nazi mind.

Kurt had remained in that oppressive tyranny which he always remembered as an insipid and vacuous sub-urban ossification of sorts. In those troubled years he had reported to Johann all he could discover. Passing vital legal information through the usual complicated network of sympathisers and sometime professional agents. Working with Dr Schacht who was responsible for laying the economic foundations of the coming war. London had in this fashion been informed of German war preparations.

Now with the economic miracle still holding thanks to the judicious use of money available through the Marshal Plan time had healed the many scars inflicted in that dark contest of world domination. Both men and thousands like them had seen enough of the world to know of the rending opportunistic vastitudes caused by the pretentious illusions of the European intellect. A peculiar phase lacking in reason. Thinking itself supreme when in fact it was driven by often unknowable and irrational mood swings urged on by latent fears and petty passions. And now something just as ugly was rearing its head again.

“Please, sit down.” His well fed friend indicated as they indulged in the German custom of shaking hands over his polished mahogany desk. There were few papers upon it. In reception they heard a typewriter busily clicking away. Kurt pressed the intercom and asked his secretary not to disturb them and to hold any incoming calls. They retired to two well padded leather chairs. His legal tomes around them in front of a small stylish glass coffee table.

“Whiskey?”

“Please.”

Kurt opened an antique drinks cabinet and poured two generous glasses of Glenfiddich. His office was deliberately old world. No glaring neon lights, no chromed

furniture. The office more a study aglow with softly polished wooden furniture richly decorated with fragrant flowers whilst warm electric lights were set amongst delicately crafted sculptures. Next to his legal books a bookcase dealing with history.

“What brings you here?” Kurt lit a Turkish cigarette one which Johann accepted with relish. For a moment they savoured the delicate taste and enticing aroma.

“Some odd manuscripts have surfaced recently thanks to the all seeing eyes of Rosenberg.”

“And?” Kurt sipping his drink.

“Someone is dabbling, creating distortions.”

“Where?”

“New South Wales, Australia.”

“Down there?”

“Yes. At the Outback. Secluded.”

“Except our Rosenberg.”

“A source.”

“How bad?”

“Several mysterious murders. All at the same location. Occultly executed.”

“Is it contained?”

“So far.”

“A hot spot.”

“A transgression.”

“Any idea?”

“As far as the source can ascertain, the local aborigines.”

“Really?”

“You look surprised.”

“I am. I thought they were dormant. Is something being revived there?”

“That is one way of putting it.”

“What’s the other way then?”

“I have called a meeting with the Countess.”

“That serious.”

“Serious enough for me to cancel my trip to the opera tonight. Anna is somewhat displeased.”

“I can understand. When?”

“Twenty o’ clock.”

They drove under the pastel twilight of summer. Passing through the Kleingartenkolonie then along the Kleiner Wannsee harbouring what little there was left of the old Teuter Wald and the baroque Schloss Pfaueninsel. The VW turned onto a narrow unsealed path one of the few left in the city and pulled up at an unpretentious but roomy house set in an immaculate English garden. Dusk was approaching, brooding over the silent forest as plaintive cries of water birds echoed through the warm evening air.

A stony faced butler come bodyguard showed them into the foyer. The décor was a blend of baroque homeliness. Piquant in style balancing the necessary daily comforts with aesthetic beauty. They were shown into an rococo anteroom where on a small tray stood two glasses of the finest French brandy. The butler handed them the warm bulbous glasses which they balanced in their hands swirling the dark amber liquid savouring the delightful aroma. A double door opened silently.



They entered a darkened room. The air cool and refreshing for ionizers had been added to the air conditioning. To one side were double glazed bullet proof windows where they saw a black mass of silhouetted trees loom up in front of them. Entering the spacious room was a step into the next century. Huge computer banks and green glowing terminals. The walls a pleasant soothing grey creating a feeling of vastness and burgeoning space.

Sliding into two powder blue contoured reclining chairs they faced a raised working table. A feminine voice controlled, ancient firmly in command materialised in welcoming tones through the room's hidden sound system. They set their glasses onto individual glass tables which had been thoughtfully placed next to their seats as the two men made themselves comfortable facing the all encompassing voice.

Pale lights glowed from the desk's screen onto a sculpted white face hovering above an array of flickering glowing screens. In the background the bare hum of discreet computer banks. Her deep black eyes stood out hovering in a mask like face reminding them of Japanese stage artists. The computers continued with their secrets clicking, humming to themselves.

"It was good of you Herr Brauner to acquaint us with the unusual phenomena manifesting in Australia. As usual your network had been to say the least on its toes." A wan smile stretched across her pale face. The eyes remaining as dark and as unfathomable as ever.

"Thank you countess." Johann replied his voice somehow lost in the cool ambience of the room.

“You say these murders are of an occult nature. We must of course always assume a worst case scenario. That being so do you think there are greater ramifications involved?”

“Yes indeed. No shaman could be so powerful on his own countess.” His left hand swirling the brandy. He took a sip.

“I agree. Please continue.”

Another sip. “I do not think this is a localised event. Its origin seems to lie outside the continent.” He wondered if it was even terrestrial.

“Outside? Given the population’s diversity anybody could be behind this.”

“Perhaps. But even if this were so that particular person or persons would I think be a conduit channelling their telesomatic powers from an outside source.”

“Telesomatic?” Kurt asked.

Johann turned to his friend. “It is the use of hyper synchronised waves transmitted over a given distance inducing biologically negative results.”

Kurt merely nodded. This was not quite his field of expertise.

Johann continued: “The use of ESP which our American friends call ‘novel biological information transfer systems’ is based essentially on ELF mind control. It stands for extremely low frequency radio waves working on the same frequency as the human brain. Transmitting signals in such frequencies that will interfere with the natural activity of the target inducing severe dysfunctions.”

“Explain.” The countess prompted. Not that it was new, she wanted the scenario behind this.

“The target is tracked using pre-cognitive stratagems on a non-cognitive level of awareness. In short, remote sensing. Now there are two ways to achieve this. The obvious

one most of as are familiar with is with the use of psi's. These are specific individuals who have an EV level easily fifty times that of normal people. By their own will they can impose through their telesomatic brain waves a chosen scenario onto the specific target. In short you could call it voodoo warfare." Sipping more of his brandy.

"And the other?" Kurt whispered afraid of what he might hear.

"Psychotronic induction achieved technologically through artificial amplification of psychic energy by electronic devices with cryptomenta technologies."

"Just like that?" Kurt flabbergasted. Looking suspiciously at the computer banks.

"Amplification of these delta, theta waves or whatever achieves its objective by jamming the synoptic neuron junctions and through this disruption virtually paralysing the nervous system. That is its crude result. But there are 'radionic multi-spectral image analysers' which can home in on a specific dysfunctioning frequency leaving the mind open to suggestion. Prompting it into actions of an abnormal if not ahm, alien nature."

"By alien do you mean non human intelligence or simply as an outside force?"

Kurt asked. The countess content to listen.

"Indeed." The countess replied cryptically. "For the moment we are assuming that it is simply an outside force of the victims being unduly influenced. The idea of non human intelligence has to be counted out at this stage. The SETI programme is still drawing blanks. So we must assume it is of human origin. An alien intelligence would have little chance of understanding the human brain anyway. We ourselves, as humans I mean have just begun to scratch the surface, literally."

"Telepathic hypnosis has proven to be effective. We also know that such methods bring out past reincarnations within a given personality. It is a good assumption to begin with. A working hypothesis if you will." Johann continued.

“Agreed.” The countess said. “So what we have to find out is if this phenomena is occurring within Australia, who is behind it and if it does come from another source, where that source is. Any suggestions?”

“If I may?” Johann sounded determined.

“Of course.”

“Ever since the Nautilus experiments the Soviets decided to enter the field of psi research. And we have to assume that they have no qualms in engaging in this unpopular, academically speaking form of research. No bourgeois blinkers there. We know that at Novosibirsk such research was in progress.”

“Was?” The countess asked.

“Yes. Was. A special department designated simply as ‘number eight’ was pursuing this field. It was a branch of the ‘Institute of Automation and Electrometry’. Closed around ten years ago. We believe it is now run by the KGB in Moscow.”

“That is ominous indeed. Because it indicates that they were enjoying some form of success. But does this indicate that the Soviets are behind this?”

“It is a distinct possibility. They are probably trying to achieve results all over the globe. The sudden dysfunctioning societies in the third and fourth world are prime candidates. With the colonial powers gone the field is wide open.”

“Yes. The world situation does not look good for us as it does for the Soviets. They are gaining ground. Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, the Middle East, the so-called anti-nuclear peace movements amongst us, the list goes on.” The countess verified.

“So what you are saying is that there is more than just political and military manipulation involved here.” Kurt added cautiously.

“Most certainly.” Johann replied convinced.

“What will it mean, apart from what is happening already? Social collapse for instance?”

“Something is being resurrected. Inserted would be a better way of describing this. With such potent mental decay in progress we have to analyse whether it is merely cyclic, which would be manageable or if a deliberate pattern of thought is being inserted into target minds, distorting the very perception of reality as we perceive it.”

“Yes.” The countess said slowly.

“What have you in mind?” Johann asked her.

“Australia. The signals are strongest there. The localisation is unique. It is as if someone is flexing their psychic muscle. Someone is very confident and that is dangerous.”

“Australia it is then. Should I pass the word to my experts in place there?”

“What do they think?”

“Intrigued is the best way to describe it.”

“Maybe you should join them. Enjoy the sunshine. See some kangaroos. Shoot the waves at Manly.” The countess said dead pan. Though Johann was almost certain there was a twinkle in her eyes.

### **Australia**

The flight to Sydney too long. A little jet lagged Johann having checked into the recommended hotel by his contact decided first and foremost to call in. Downing suggested they meet the next day. Johann then retired and slept for nearly twenty four hours.

Upon waking he was a little disoriented as to where exactly he was. Half way around the world. Room service brought him a 'European breakfast' which was not very European at all. Coffee, croissants yes. But pleasantly surprised with the rock melon,

corn flakes and orange juice, a nice tropical touch. He parted the curtains and saw to his delight a clear blue sky and a partial view of the harbour bridge.

Watching the early morning news on television had been an education. The permanent tensions of the cold war, the Middle East simply not there. He felt at ease. The political problems of Europe non existent. A perspective devoid of posturing politicians for ever on edge in constant power struggles ranging across countries absent. Perhaps it was the climate.

On the way over he had read up on aboriginal folklore something he was not familiar with. With very few similarities to the dark brooding self tortured heroes of Nordic myth. When around eleven he heard a knock on his door he was ready for some human company.

“Herr Brauner?”

The gentleman was casually dressed, an open shirt and an indifferent jacket. Their eyes shone with a bright intelligence set into an amiable tanned face.

“Professor Downing I take it.” He replied in his best high school English. “Please come in.”

“Thank you.”

He surveyed the hotel room.

“Nice place you have here. How was the flight?”

“So so. Boring. Too long. I had no idea just how huge your country is and so empty. It’s vastness mind numbing. I kept on thinking of we were to go down we would perish in the emptiness.”

“Yes even us natives feel it. So where would you like to go for lunch?”

“I do not know your city.”

“What I meant was what kind of a lunch would you prefer? Formal silver ware, informal or totally proletarian?” Mark laughed.

“Ach I see. Well let me think. Silver service one can have anywhere in the world and it is always the same. I think I feel a little adventurous. Something proletarian as you suggest.”

“Excellent.”

“What is it like outside?”

“Cool, same as yesterday.”

“And this is your winter?”

“Indeed it is. But we are lucky today. There is hardly a breeze. Quite mild for this time of year.”

“Would you like some coffee perhaps?”

“No thanks. Well. When you are ready we might as well be off.”

“I await your pleasure.” Johann replied rested enough. Brimming with energy.

Passing the lobby Mark asked Johann if he liked seafood.

“That would be a welcome change, yes.”

“In that case we can walk. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. It is such a pleasant day. So this is your winter?” repeating himself pleased with the mild climate.

“It can drop down to thirteen.”

“Minus?”

“Good heavens no. We would all be living in Queensland instead of here.”

They left the Quay and headed towards The Rocks passing under the rumbling train line and the Cahill expressway.



“This is one of the oldest parts of Sydney.”

“Interesting. It looks so English except there seems to be a sparkle about it. Light and colourful. European winters makes everything look so drab.”

“I can well imagine.”

“You have been to Europe?”

“No I’m sorry to say.”

“Why sorry?”

“Your art galleries, your culture. Everybody of my generation went to England at least once. Maybe incorporate a little of the continent but somehow I never got around to it. Mainly work.”

“I can understand that.”

They walked under the Argyle Bridge and after another block came out at Pier One.

“You are lucky having this harbour. That is one thing we do know. And the opera house.”

“That was a lot of controversy. The politicians had a vision but it was not Utzen’s. In the end the recriminations got too much and he left an unsung hero. At one stage they wanted to turn it into a cross between a concert hall and a boxing ring, something like that. But after costing around four times as much as the original price it all worked out.”

“It is a remarkable building. I can see a little of it from my window. Very futuristic.”

“Ah. Here we are.”

They were walking along an open deck where several restaurants ran down the length of the converted wharf. Taking their seats in the open underneath a colourful sun umbrella.

“Have a look at the menu while I will get us something to drink. What would you prefer? Beer, wine, champagne?”

“Oh not champagne. It goes straight to my head. I might start of with some beer.”

“Any special type? You see some restaurants do not have alcohol but one is allowed to bring one’s own. So lager alright?”

“Yes fine.” Studying the offerings. Mark vanished and a waiter came out but Johann asked him to return a little later.

The setting was delightful overlooking an older wharf still used by a small fishing fleet. In front of him stretched the calm waters of the harbour and in the distance the suburbs dotted here and there with some high rise apartments. Even the trains rumbling across the bridge added to the atmosphere. But what really surprised him was how uncrowded this place was. A spot like this in Europe would be crawling with people and tourists. The prices would be astronomical. He hoped he was not putting the good professor out of pocket.

Glancing at the menu he decided to have Italian seafood. Considering the exchange rate he was truly amazed just how cheap the meals were. You could easily double if not triple the price in Europe. His sojourn here would be most satisfying. Contentment swept through him. Mark returned carrying a six pack of Crown Lager.

“Well professor Downing I am ready to order.”

“Please call me Mark.”

They both had a dozen oysters naturale as an entrée followed by frito misto only because neither of them could decide what to have. Having finished their meal and beers they sat easily soaking up the warmth of the sun. A cold wind sprung up the temperature dropping quickly. Mark suggested they retire to the bar at the front of the wharf which was enclosed. There they strolled Mark having picked up the tab. Now Johann 'owed' him a few drinks.

The restaurant and bar was totally glassed in. The view superb and as it was after lunch they secured a table right at the window. Ferries plied the waters, a few sailing boats meandered past. The scene tranquillity itself. Johann chose a large Chartreuse green while Mark had a double Black Bourbon on ice. Johann offered one of his Turkish cigarettes which Mark accepted.

"So professor, I mean Mark. I have brushed up on your aboriginal folklore. From what I can gather they have their shamans. And something of a unique event in Napier. We are extremely interested in these events. What on earth is going on, in your opinion?"

"Well," returning his drink to the table, ashing his cigarette. "where to begin? On the surface it seems to be the usual social problems. Whites versus blacks. The graziers took all the best land and the local tribe want some of it back. That's where it gets political. Now the federal government for the last six years has been more positive to the aboriginals which has caused some resentment among the cow-cookies." Seeing Johann frown corrected himself: "Farmers."

"And you think this is the primary cause?"

"Always has been. But then people started to vanish and or die. The coronial enquiry non committal."

"But tell me Mark. You know there is something else."

He sighed. He wished what he knew was mere fantasy. What Martin had told him disturbing. Such things were from the dark ages. Existing in traditional societies across the world. But this, this was a different manifestation. He signalled for the waiter for another round with two glasses of water to keep his head clearer. The waiter returned promptly with his order.

“To get this into perspective is not easy. What you are about to hear will sound rather bizarre. According to my research student who was a witness to what you are about to hear I can tell you this is no flight of fancy.”

Johann lit another cigarette, Mark declining his offer.

“Some farm hands recently were, according to my student murdered, no make that disposed of by unnatural means. We had a good contact in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs investigate the area and one of their field officers had a heart attack. The farm where this occurred suffered a tragedy in the murder-suicide of its owners.”

“All within a short space of time?”

“A couple of weeks at the most.”

“This is dreadful. And the local tribe or their shaman is behind this?”

“The people of the Napier have always been a little different. The isolation. Whites have always vanished there, and died. But before I forget some preliminary research was done there by anthropologists in the twenties. And you won’t like this, Nervous breakdowns if not mental, ending their careers and one his life.”

A studied silence from Johann.

“It is not very pleasant. What you and your people want to take on is dangerous.”

“I am beginning to see that. Anything else?”

“The aborigines there are known as the ‘Pinja’. Back in their Dreamtime they were threatened by a character known as ‘Bahloo’. In the end the Pinja won a major battle. However Bahloo’s medicine man survived threatening revenge. Now the problem I think is this: Bahloo is making a comeback and somehow the Pinja are involved. Though the ancient war is over and their differences settled.” Nearly saying ‘buried’.

“So they are united.”

“Could be. It is a likely scenario.”

“Could I meet your research student?”

“I am afraid he is in Nepal. He had an offer as research assistant with a colleague of ours. A Rosenberg.”

“Yes.” Johann said thoughtfully. Why had not the countess mentioned this?

“What do you intend to do then?”

“Have a look at the place.”

“To achieve what?”

“My, our I am sorry, people believe that the presence of a place can reveal an orientation of the mind. The lay of the land. Mentally. Then there are the anthropologist’s notes. Are they at your university?”

“I was leaving that to my research student. Well we should try before you leave for the Napier.”

“I was hoping you could come along.”

“Work commitments. I am sorry.”

“There is a break coming up next week if I am not mistaken.”

“You certainly have done your homework. Ah, I’ll never get my book finished.”

“What are you working on?”

“Nothing related to this. It’s about the forces of science shaping our perception of reality and how that affects historical processes.”

“Interesting. I like the perception of reality bit.”

“Thank you. So these records, if any can shed light onto the situation then?”

“Yes.” Johann answered with firm conviction, draining his glass.

For the next few days Johann Brauner and Mark Downing spent hours in the library and archives of Sydney University tracking down the notes and monograms of Dr Steven Homer and his assistant Dr Stuart Neville. They had been prodigious workers and the amount of information produced by them was voluminous. On the third day Mark found what was being sought.

Notes Neville had written whilst investigating the Napier. According to him:

*‘It began with a letter I received from Homer which contained a newspaper clipping from the valley. This concerned the disappearance of two tourists near the Bahloo Bend of the Napier and had the local police and aboriginal trackers completely baffled. It was as if they had vanished from the face of the earth.’*

*‘Homer informed me he was instigating his own investigation. I knew he would relish the challenge thus offered and soon discovered that this particular couple were not the first to vanish at this spot. The local people were aware of the mysterious occurrences which surfaced now and again but it came as no surprise that nobody could, or would explain the recondite phenomena which so incessantly vexed this particular stretch of river. Needless to say the locals avoided the spot like the plague. It was marginal grazing land and the owners merely put on a stoic front. They probably feared a devaluation of*

*their land if these stories ever gained hold outside the area. Homer checked up on the Bahloo myth and came up with this:’*

*’Back in the Dreamtime this particular god had tried to cross the Napier River with two of his pet familiars. They were customary two dogs who could change at will into serpents which were known to all. But this time Bahloo wanted to muster human aid for his cynosures to be safely carried across. To his dismay he realised his plea was being denied by the aborigines on the other side. They claimed they were frightened of his spiritual favourites. The incensed culture hero Bahloo vented his rage upon them in a rather extreme and devastating way.’*

*’For their stubbornness and refusal to help Bahloo decided to curse them with eternal death!’*

*’And with that note of cheer he signed his letter off.’*

“Wonderful.” Johann exclaimed when Mark showed him the dairy of Neville.

“The potency of this myth is cosmic in dimension, eternal in its tragedy of death coming into paradise.”

“Yes I agree. Well Johann I had no ideas as to the importance of this myth and its location. Given the ramifications of our discovery I think there is another person who could be of invaluable help to us.”

“Mark I want to keep this as quiet and low key as possible. The less people know of this the safer we will be.”

“Johann I think it is a little late for that. Anyway this friend of mine is invaluable believe me. He already knows what had occurred in the Napier Valley. But more importantly he can shed light onto what we are dealing with here.”

The next morning turned chilly. A blustery southerly front was coming in from Antarctica. Mark had telephoned Samuel Parry and informed him of Johann Brauner's arrival from West Berlin just recently. He suggested they meet at his favourite haunt the 'Cecil'. A meeting was arranged that same evening, Parry inviting them to have dinner there.

"This was an excellent meal Dr Parry," Brauner beamed with satisfaction. "I did not know English cooking could be so rich in flavour. Perhaps it is the food grown and reared in this country. And the red wine you chose was equal to any I have drunk in Europe. My compliments to you."

Samuel was beaming if not for having quaffed a bottle himself. Mark had stuck to his Crown Lager. Red wine sent him into an instant hazy daze.

They adjourned to the lounge for brandy and coffee. The plush surroundings, the discreet conversations and the refined atmosphere rounded off the comfortable atmosphere of this reclusive watering hole. The tables far apart enough for an engaging conversation held in private.

Mark outlined the latest development. Sam listening attentively, sipping his brandy, replenishing it when the glass was drained of its rich golden essence. When Mark had finished Sam asked what Johann's interest in these events was.

Johann scratched his head.

"I am with a privately funded research institute. We deal with human abnormalities and its possible consequences not only regarding the mental health of society but also its possible political repercussions. What is occurring in the Napier Valley is highly unusual."



“So it’s not just a matter of academic interest.” Sam probed.

“Not at all. But allow me to say this. We are not a think tank, we are not affiliated with any political group or economic advisory council. We do not deal with governments or industrial conglomerates.”

“Pure research then I take it?” Sam suggested.

“Indeed yes.” Johann lied. The answer the cover any of the members used and was always believed as such. He had merely iterated what they were not.

“So what do you hope to learn from going there?”

“The spirit of the place.”

“Durrell.”

“Something like that.”

“Hm. This is your first visit to our shores?”

Johann merely nodded.

“Spy out the land and its people.” Sam hinted.

Johann nodded. The brandy was making him amiable, mellow. But he kept his head. “That would be expecting too much.”

They decided Johann and Samuel would visit the Napier. Mark begging off due to his workload. It was the end of term and he had papers to mark. His students would come first. They all assented Sam indicating he would keep in touch if any developments arose.

On the third day Sam phoned. Mark was at home reading the essays of his honour students. He rose from his study welcoming the break. His wife Kate was out visiting some old friends whom Mark though a little too pretentious. So he avoided them as often as he could. And he kept reminding himself to get an extension put into his retreat.

“Can you come down here as soon as possible?” Was the first thing Sam said when Mark lifted the receiver in the dining room. He could tell Sam was agitated his voice barely disguising his anxiety.

“Not really. Why?”

“It’s Brauner. He’s in hospital.”

Mark felt his stomach tighten.

“You there?” Sam asked insistent.

“Yes. Is he OK, are you OK?”

“I’m fine. But I am fearing for Brauner’s sanity. He’s receiving treatment at the local hospital. I’m afraid he’s in bad shape.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I can only guess. It’s his mind.”

Mark gripped the receiver his knuckles white. This was getting out of control.

“You are the only one he knows here and presumably trusts. Then there is the problem of getting in touch with his people.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” Sam laughed. His voice betrayed something Mark did not like. The man sounded on edge. Not like Sam at all. “I think I’ll survive. So can you come?”

“How serious is it? I mean is Brauner stable or what?”

“See for yourself. I would leave but for our friend. We need to talk, urgently.”

“Phone me back tomorrow, this is a bad time.”

“You’re not kidding. Something is definitely happening here, believe me.” Sam’s voice still a little shaky.

Mark informed him he would make the necessary arrangements as soon as practicable. Sam sighed saying he understood.

Should he get in touch with Brauner's group? Or find out first how he really was then panic. He chose the latter.

His concentration broken he found it difficult to resume his work. What could have happened? It was useless. In the back of his mind he feared the worst. Perhaps he had made contact with a medicine man or maybe the incarnation of Bahloo. Maybe Brauner had interfered with something sacred or stumbled across a sacred site, disturbed some artefact as had Roger. There was no way around it. Becoming increasingly apprehensive with not knowing decided the issue. He would go.

The front door slammed shut as Kate returned in a happy boisterous mood.

"Hello darling I'm home." She sang. Her ebullience did little to dispel his sombreness.

"Hi." He smiled weakly. She sensed his mood immediately.

"What is it?" Concern etched on her face. She was carrying a bottle of Traminer Riesling, his favourite. "I thought maybe we could have a nightcap. I stopped off at the local and picked this up." Waving it in front of him. Her eyes radiant. With her boyish haircut, her cheeks flushed she looked delightful.

"It's Brauner. He's in hospital."

"Nothing serious I hope?" Not too concerned. She did not know him. And Kate was not one to go into a tizz regarding other people. What endeared her to him.

Not wishing to go into explanations, Kate didn't expect any anyway he said: "I don't know. Sam though wants me to come down. I think he's upset."

“Naturally. No, go if you have to. Work won’t run away haha. I mean,” she brightened, “you never finish your students papers on time anyway.” Winking at him.

He was feeling better thanks to Kate’s sprightliness. Her cheerfulness infectious and he loved her for it. Even after twenty years.

He switched off his study light, Kate poured the wine and they relaxed in their cosy living room. Dave Brubeck was playing in the background.

Sitting next to him at ninety degrees, legs tucked under she asked “Tell me what’s going on.” Getting a perspective.

He drank half the glass. Tasty. “One of my research students was investigating certain occult occurrences regarding the local aborigines in the Napier Valley. He’s from there. To cut a long story short people have died in mysterious circumstances.”

“When you say occult you mean voodoo?” rolling her eyes. The dead didn’t worry Kate. It was the living who did that. He loved her attitude.

“Something like that.” It was a pithy answer.

“Urgh. And this is for real?” fascinated. Her eyes bright the more so from having had a few bottles with her friends. The impact of the news wearing off.

“Very.” Trying to be serious. But with Kate at times that was impossible.

“In this century. Here in Australia. Land of booze and pies and footy.”

“Exactly.”

“Well I did say you ought to go. But this is not your field, is it?” looking at him with renewed interest

“No not really. More a sideline historically. Comparative religions and all that. But remember the aborigine’s belief systems are still active.”

She drank some of her wine watching the gas fire.

“When are you off then?”

“The way Sam sounded, right away.”

“Get it over with.”

“Yes. Not pleasant. But you have made it easier. No that’s wrong.” His smile genuine. “Want to come with me?”

“No, not really. I mean it’s only a day or two right?”

“I insist on that my sweet.” Then gave her a kiss on the cheek which she lapped up like a comfortable cat. Closing her eyes sensually...

Sam phoned at six the next evening. Mark was waiting as he had been all day. His apprehension back. Sam more composed. Brauner still sedated.

“I can get away.” Mark spinning it out a bit even if Kate had helped him make up his mind. Sam felt relieved Mark could tell.

“I’ll book you a room at the ‘Riverview Motel’. It’s at the northern end of town. Maybe a mile out. Can’t miss it. It’s the only one here.”

“Any developments?”

“I’m inclined not to wish for any. You would not believe it but it’s real.”

“Yes I’ve been thinking that myself.”

“If its any consolation whatever is happening affects different people in different ways. Your student for instance...”

“I’ve pondered that as well. Maybe some are immune or just plain lucky.”

“Unfortunately Brauner is not one of them.”

“How is he?”

“The drugs have stablelized him but that’s about all. He’s doped to the eyeballs.”

“Give him my kindest regards.”

Sam sighed. “When can I expect you?” not as insistent as yesterday.

“The drive’s what? Eight hours or so?”

“If you don’t push it. Road’s good. Not much traffic. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow, sunrise.”

“That’s good. I’ll tell reception.” The line crackled. Mark waited. “You know I cannot believe, though I must that after all these years of research how unprepared I am in my mind in handling this. I’ve dealt with the weird all my life. And our friend had some interesting ideas. A tad eccentric in his views. But this is incomprehensible. No that is not correct. It is real.” Sam having to accept the facts on the ground. “That madness can be an objective cause endangering life. Who would guess or foresee that we seem to have a presence, no call it a malign intelligence patiently waiting to choose its victims.”

Mark was lost for words.

“I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon then. The ‘Riverview’.”

“Thank you.”

Sam sounded weary with exhaustion.

Brauner’s unfortunate condition took away any cheerfulness Mark might have enjoyed driving out into the country, the Outback. The cold was intense once he crossed the Great Dividing Range. The Napier Valley freezing as the sun was shining. The town deserted, languid like a Dobell painting. Under a blanket oppression. He found the motel.

Booked in, was shown out back to his room. Had a shower to freshen up then knocked on Sam’s door. The older lady most courteous and helpful once she knew who

he was. He knocked on Sam's door and was shocked at how Sam looked. Drawn, tired his eyes listless. Distracted.

Then talked of things inconsequential. Sam skirting around what was on both men's minds. Mark let him ramble on letting him get a grip on his own thoughts.

Sam made coffee for the both of them saying the bar fridge was open and took out two tiny bottles of brandy. Swallowing it in one gulp Sam lit a cigarette his hands shaking slightly. Mark downed his as well if only for the effect. Wondering if Brauner had some kind of nervous breakdown. These things happened. Not pleasant but just the same...and decided to go visit Brauner.

The hospital was just outside town on a road leading out west. A large rambling mansion set in immaculate grounds. Situated on the edge of rolling hills gums scattered across towards the horizon. The grass yellow. Idyllic in the sunshine except for the icy breeze.

At reception they were shortly welcomed by Dr Fadden who was taking care of Brauner. A sprightly young man in his early thirties Fadden ushered them into his private office. Showed them to the huge leather sofa and pressed each of his visitors with a cup of percolated coffee which they accepted gladly from a bubbling stand on a bench next to the wash basin. Fadden was a cheruby blond haired man whose concern for his patients was far more serious than his beguiling youth seemed to indicate. To Mark's relief there were no abstract paintings, which he abhorred, becoming trendy in the city to suffocate their clients with.

Fadden sitting behind his paper strewn desk was a mark of single minded concentration. He extracted a slim manila folder from a dishevelled pile precariously

balanced at the edge. Given the circumstances Fadden did not mind when Samuel asked if he could smoke studying the doctor with nervous apprehension. Which surprised Mark.

“Your friend Johann Brauner appears to have had a psychotic episode.” Fadden said reservedly. “A most unusual case. I am not a psychiatrist but the symptoms are obvious.” Setting the file aside. Forcing a smile. “He’s on barbiturates.” Then lit a cigarette himself.

“When he is more stable I would recommend his removal to psychiatric care at the base hospital or we keep him here and wait for our monthly specialist to care for him.”

“He is stable?” Mark asked.

“It’s the circumstances which are puzzling gentlemen. Brauner was found by some locals near the river in an extremely disassociated state of mind. Someone must have called an ambulance. The crew stabilized him. He was in an extreme state of anxiety. But not dangerous. By probing gently upon arrival when he became, ahm, relatively lucid trying to ascertain his condition he came under the impression that he was suffering from schizoid-paranoia. I have no idea of his medical history you see.” Seeing if his visitors could help him. They could not.

“It is as if he were obsessed. He is in utter dread and fear. But fearing what? Is this something recurrent? I don’t know. Gentlemen I need your help.” Looking from Samuel to Mark.

There was a studied silence.

“Anything will do. Or whom I can get in touch with?”

“We are more professionally acquainted doctor Fadden. As is Mark here.”

“I see. We went over this but I want to ask Mark. Was he stable before?”



“Yes. We had a delightful lunch. Very stable, very together.”

“Hm.”

“No obsessive traits? Or repressed nervousness?”

Mark shook his head and rose handing his empty cup to Fadden.

“We know paranoids have delusions of being persecuted, under alien observation if not control. Random events have meanings we wouldn’t dream of. Your friend is showing these traits.”

“Does he mention the source of this disturbance?” Mark asked.

“An entity seems to haunt him.”

“Peculiar.” Mark deflected.

“He is under shock. That much I do know. The trouble is when the sedatives wear off the possession, obsession returns. He is unhinged.” Observing them both to see if that would trigger memories with his visitors.

Nothing.

“Last night, so the duty nurse informed me he relapsed. A massive panic attack. Massive gentlemen. It took several of our staff to restrain him from totally going bezerk. It was bad. Manifesting symptoms indicating powerful hallucinations leading to paranoid delusions as I said and now persecution manias. It is all so medieval. He is totally sedated. I fear his mind is collapsing. And I hate to admit it I am helpless against these persistent symptoms. He might have to get air-lifted to a psychiatric ward. Once he is stable enough that is.”

Mark and Sam sat there stunned. But said nothing.

“Do you wish to see him?” solicitous.

They rose, Sam handing him his cup and accompanied by a hefty male nurse entered after walking through some wards to a small private room. Upon the bed, strapped into a straitjacket was their dear colleague. Brauner was a barely his former self. Even nearly knocked out he was a whimpering fear maddened calamity. His eyes tiny black pins.

He did not recognise Mark or Samuel. Slurring, dribbling, grunting in frightful moans Brauner was besieged by mental aberrations. They both stood there transfixed. Dr Fadden looked sadly at them shaking his head.

The air went frigid, then heavy.

Outside in the distance dogs began to bark. Their calls a vibrant throaty resonance too close for comfort. Reverberating in their heads. The wild yet proximate call changed Brauner who contorted into a hideously hell blasted mask. With the incessant howling his mind seemed to be assailed by their gut wrenching terror. An insane frenzy gripped his body in a steely vice gripping him so brutally one of the restraints ripped. Mucousy phlegm burst from his deformed mouth over his loosely flapping straitjacket. His body twisting into unnatural contortions. Driven like a jackhammer now bouncing upon the floor with the barking dogs having come closer. Screaming babbling tormented inanities.

The male nurse and doctor rushed towards the poor hapless victim straining to contain his explosive outbursts of volcanic rage. Samuel and Mark stood hypnotised by the yapping growling dogs and the boiling violence around them. Both doctor and nurse had difficulty in containing this eruption of diabolical madness. All three were thrashing around the floor being thrown about as if they were mannequins maliciously abused by a demented master.

The shouts had by now alarmed the other staff for within moments other male nurses stormed in. Two of them were ready, one with a syringe tackling the thrashing patient. At last succeeding with the injection. Within seconds it was over. They were all panting, the doctor and the first nurse totally winded. The rescue operation they thought successful. Upon closer inspection Fadden realised Johann Brauner was dead.

The silence heavy.

The dogs no more.

After the inquest Samuel phoned West Berlin and it was decided that Johann Brauner be buried at Napier. What surviving relatives there were they could not afford the long journey to Australia. Samuel took possession of what little personal effects Brauner had brought with him sending most of it back. His clothes and associated paraphernalia were donated to charity. His notes and the few books he took with him back to Sydney. For the moment Mark returned to his work. Samuel informed him after perusing his notes he would contact Mark if anything turned up.

It took Samuel several days to sift through the accumulated material. Then on a cold winter's night he found a clue to the disastrous and lethal turn of events which had taken Brauner's life so prematurely. Amongst his notes Sam found pertinent evidence. It was disturbing.

*'As I type this I have little time left to fully explain the information I am about to set down for our comrades in this quest. Even this I do with a lot of reservation. What we*

*do know and what we are pursuing so assiduously the bulk of humanity would dismiss instantly as some sort of aberration if not an indulgence.'*

*'Since delving into this mysterious problem of ours I have begun to feel all too distinctively an entity of sorts threatening to attack me in some outlandish way. The sinister foreboding is for the moment taking the form of an inexorable and undisputable weirdness. All this I admit is a little out of the ordinary but bear with me as to what I am about to reveal.'*

*'It is a fact that people who have vanished here seem to be the victims of an ancient aboriginal myth. As such it gives the police absolutely nothing to go on. Yet everybody ignores this myth concerning the curse of Bahloo and his canine familiars.'*

*'I cannot as yet prove this but if this deity has been summoned or worse had decided to return of its own accord then the disappearance and presumable deaths of the others gives rise to my worst suspicions. The locals and the aborigines especially claim to hear on certain nights the barking of ferocious dogs. I can readily assent to their howling which at the time I so hastily if not too readily dismissed. I should have been more attentive to the subtle prompting of my own premonitions.'*

*'In the end I set off for the Bahloo bend to solve this mystery and I wish in retrospect my curiosity had not gotten the better of me for I was not prepared for what was to unfold. Here is a lore and a power alien to our way of thought. The whole psychology behind this aboriginal tremendum is so outré the mere idea of its existence chills me to the bone. I am convinced the lunar morbidity has indeed returned and does so on an almost regular basis. It presently stalks this land, hungering after the living.'*

*'The Bahloo bend at this time of year is serene and sluggish. The place is picturesque shaded by plenty of trees. The slight rise of the embankment affords a*

*delightful view of the bush which extends for kilometres into open space. Scattered hills stretch as far as the horizon with not a soul in sight. [Another difference. Europe being crowded with people – behind every hill would have been at least a village.] Comes evening one gets the feeling that nature has opened her illimitable dimensions revealing an infinitude of possibilities so glaringly bereft in our teeming cities. Then I noticed with some surprise and later trepidation the absence of animals. No insects, no rodents or your kangaroos seem to come to refresh themselves at the river's edge. I am utterly on my own.'*

*'The silent desolation became sullenly oppressive, the tranquillity cunningly deceptive. The area laboured under an unpleasant and outlandish divagation. The moon rose drawing with it secret inimical and baleful elements. In this rapidly darkening place I felt with pellucid certainty that something was near me. It felt macabre impregnated with a derisive evil bearing an ill will against any living being – against me if I allowed myself to fall into its ghastly clutches. Here was a hideous and ancient manifestation having existed longer than man has walked this planet.'*

*'With unnatural speed everything changed. The darkness around me displaced all normal perception of reality. The ingress of an unearthly inhuman grotesquery had materialised at this cursed and hell bound place. I began to fear for both my sanity and my life.'*

*'Suddenly hounds barked presaging the arrival of the deadly lunar god. I felt the approaching slaverling growling threats snapping at me from deep within my mind! I left the place and still the barking cacophony of hell pursued me. Now I fear it lives within me.'*

*'Yet victory can still be achieved. I know I can defeat the carrion craving of the ebon god. There exists on your aboriginal lore the legend of the "hard-hearted bronze-winged pigeon" [viz. read phoenix] who can counteract the extinctive power of the lunar deity. The phoenix's greater magic has been well documented in Hindu and Egyptian mythology. But here in this country I have no access to its analeptic rites and life saving incantations.'*

*'I must give you one important warning. So far I have avoided this nighted evil which has failed to enslave me. Cheated of its prey it will crave another. Be careful. Resurrect the rite of the phoenix and expunge this abdominale power.'*

Comfortably ensconced in his library Samuel glanced up from Brauner's notes gazing intently into the fireplace where blazing logs soothed his nerves and calmed his mind. He poured himself a dram of Glenfiddich and lit his pipe.

He wondered just exactly what malign fatality, what dark legendary force had arisen to destroy their contact. He was surely distressed by this testament and the subsequent maniacal illness which had destroyed him. Determined to follow the lead he had mapped out Samuel rose and consulted the ancient prayers regarding the rites of the phoenix. Yes, there it was, the answer to the problem. In this case it came from an ancient Egyptian manuscript. The phoenix did have the power to protect by its radiant light the force of life and simultaneously negate the original universal chaos with its accompanying darkness. In short Samuel was relieved to know that the phoenix encompassed the penultimate secret of creation itself. Or so it was believed.

The icy winds from the south died down. Samuel was thinking whether to phone Mark about Brauner's revelation. As he stirred to move from his reclining chair he

noticed the eerie darkness almost palpable to his senses. It was then he heard the hounds barking. Samuel in shock dropped the book he was studying and when he bent to retrieve it saw nothing but a quivering sea of inky blackness. An infinite depth was exposing a rising deranged fatuous enemy.

Agitated by the fiendish yapping of the minatory animals, their choleric threats encircled Samuel rapidly as a reminder of his inescapable bourn. Aided by preternatural speed putrescent odours swirled about the dim study. Waves of warm decaying breath stifled his lungs. Fear, terror, frenzy loomed like an impregnable fortress about him, trapping him within its esurient dreams, prophesying his immanent demise. Their grinning jaws their slobbering secretions from razor sharp teeth became too much.

A feculent wind howled through the house. All was a blur. Samuel rallied his remaining strength to engage the aid of the brightly flickering redemptive rites of the phoenix. In dark contrast the spell of the aboriginal power was opening dimensions unknown to sanity. Here in his study Samuel was being attacked by irefully incanted forces emerging from a thralldom of insensate oblivion. The prowling malevolent dogs had entered his brain seeking his life for their eldritch master.

The dogs' livid rage suddenly became a scream of horror as Samuel approached the life saving fount of the flickering phoenix. The fiery bird of eternal creation would surely banish the hounds. Thus would he assuage the abject and demented terror which had taken so many lives previously including that of their esteemed friend. He would be avenged.

The beasts shrieked with impetuous revulsion as the incandescent phoenix embraced Samuel. He had not realised how icy his body had become mere seconds ago. Their death was near. A fear filled vomitory lament of relentless torment echoed through

his brain and his house. The flames devouring with avaricious speed the ultra-stellar horrors.

Neighbours hearing the terrible noise and seeing thick clouds of smoke pouring from the house alerted the fire brigade who arriving in due time contained with efficient speed the rapidly spreading flames. Everywhere were the crisp carbonised remains of burnt paper. In the study they discovered within the huge fireplace the partially charred and deceased body of Samuel Parry, the occupant of the house. What had prompted him to engage in this act of inexplicable madness was never successfully established.

Jacko opened his eyes – he simply had to. A chill breeze was coming in off the hills sweeping the Napier Valley. For the first time through the Dreamtime's culture hero and with Gertuk's aid he had laid to waste an enemy far away from him. The dogs of Bahloo cackled triumphantly. Their sparkling ephescence glowed eerily lighting the sacred resting place of the dead medicine man.

He felt Gertuk's presence. His power was growing just as Gertuk had promised. He had destroyed another white man who would try and fathom his people's ancient secrets. The dogs wafted around him almost playfully. The trick had worked, the illusion had been real enough to fool this interloper. He could sense the land around him, cleansed, becoming more potent. Gertuk's revelation and what he promised was increasing with every visitation.



### **Vahnsin**

Zohex his mind restless with anticipation awaited the foreordained day when he intended to make an example of his might. He had every intention of showing the outer tribes just what he meant when challenging his rising supremacy.

Proud, noble warrior chiefs who had willingly submitted, often after futile resistance were answering his call, assembling at the fortress of Vahnsin. Feted and feasted, the wine loosening their tongues, dampening their recumbent hostility. For those who came under duress Zohex through potent incantations revealed the monstrous ends

with which he achieved his impregnable domination. They might think it monstrous that he, the supreme occult ruler held his domain with such determined and demented thralldom. With relentless insolence he intended to subdue those who might harbour thoughts of usurping him. He relished the idea that the slaves captured in his raids would be sacrificed to the Serpent Priests, drawing on their life essence as they expired. Feeding the beasts awesome powers of precognition. Feasting on the contents of their vanquished souls. Thereby projecting magnified fear over those who still desisted. Glorifying in the perversion of their arcane beliefs. Bending their pathetic delusions into his insatiable horror. Even lesser gods unrelenquishable as his victims felt their full force of his zeal. Resurrected by his priests who called incessantly upon the dark might of Ahriman's brood. By such foul deeds his citadel and his empire was injected with paralysing veneration of all those who came into his orbit.

Bahnum soon learned the criminal deeds the people suffered through Zohex's lust, to be the dominant force in this land. Made aware by survivors of skirmishes and intelligence gleaned from escapees who by the hundreds fed Zohex's mad gods, or if lucky were merely entombed. Those who did succumb had demented leaders thrust upon them lusting after pure raw power. Possessed by Zohex's manipulation of infusing abject terror through the psychic machinations of the Serpent Priests the Turanians found the disorganised peasants easy prey. His death dealing hordes reached with murderous tyranny further than any other, thrusting deep into the vast plains of the sub continent. Leaving in their wake the morbid reek of carrion death.

Yet the call to submit to Zohex could not be denied.

Bahnum set off with Vargis and some of his people for the disgusting citadel as a free tribe. The Elders of their Council secretly shifting their camp closer to Elburz. An astute move since even Zohex's unhinged priests could not penetrate their defences.

Bahnum upon arrival at Vahnsin mingled with the awed hunters and herders moving to the periphery of the assembled multitude. Everywhere the tall dark warriors in their animal skins barely hiding their pugnacious superiority. With their reptilian designed facial jewellery worn especially for this occasion made them look truly alien. Bahnum had seen nothing so repugnantly evil in even the worst of his possessed states of mind when delving into the twisted realms of the shamanistic world.

Erected on a raised dais of human skulls was the golden throne presumably for Zohex. The burnished gold tainted by the gloomy courtyard and Zohex's evil occupants. Looking more a compound for captives given its high obdurable granite grey towering walls with its spiked observation towers than a reception for Zohex's subjects. The sky in abject gloom. His armed chiefs with their vicious blades standing in menacing postures around the gathered. Their rejection of all Zohex stood for palpable. Accepting with distaste this momentary superior display of power.

All fell silent as Zohex appeared as if out of nowhere wrapped in the skins of the lynx. Jewellery gleaming sinisterly flashed energised by his fevered psyche. He climbed over the skulls and seated himself his black eyes deep and soulless. Enervating life itself.

He sat still on his macabre throne, the skulls grinning with perverted menace. His dark eyes now glowing insanely. Sparkling in triumph over the yielding and weakened gathering of chiefs, tribal elders and lesser leaders. He watched restlessly over them with a glint of steely demented fervour. Bahnum recognised the bestial fires animating this monstrosity. Behind the throne were the stark walls where the dark entrance of the temple

lead to even worse imagined horrors. Bahnum shuddered. Zohex trembled with a perverse ecstasy on this day of his apex surveying with icy shafts of death those who thought to continue to oppose his overweening repugnant race.

It was a voice which paralysed even Bahnum. Resonant it sounded uncannily close pounding in his brain.

“I will never forget the perfidious rebellion of the subjugated priests, petty kings, puny warlords, practitioners of the arts who with their pathetic knowledge and pernicious lies had crawled out of the mud and slime to have the affront and assail me. Plotting against the divinely ordained race of my Turanian overlords. Nor will Ahriman forget your damnable acts of treason.

In Bahnum’s stricken mind he saw in those glazed eyes the viciousness of a falsely attained power. He had seen such grotesque distortions during his apprenticeship and easily recognised the sickness in Zohex. This risen blasphemy was indeed lording it over the sub continent and its enervated people. Suffering the morbid exhaustion stifling their own inner spirits of resistance. With no will to resist.

Bahnum thinking furiously to make some connection with what he knew as Zohex droned on. Trying to ascertain which sinister realms spawned such alien life forms. He eyed the two ancient stone carvings hewn from mighty boulders. The shapes of serpent beasts glowing menacingly at those who dared look in their demonic eyes. In the cavernous gloom a faint red glow and wafting out an acidic smell from within the temple. Second guessing at the hideousness within.

The insight painful. Certain that Zohex’s priests were nothing but butchers performing barbaric rites and blood sacrifices to the delight of Ahriman’s screeching devotees. Wallowing in the frenzied massacre of their screaming victims. How even

women suffered pains and humiliations far worse than the lingering, agonising death reserved for the men.

Images of piles of burnt and mutilated flesh waiting to be devoured by the hideous remnants of ancient bestial life surviving a long dead age. The last he hoped of ancient dragon worshippers. These usurpations of evolution the final impure descendants when hell had been a reality. Bahnum's blood tingled, the scene trying to corrupt his mind. The fearfully appalling vision swam before his riveted eyes as he penetrated its inner recess and that conversely invading his mind. Which he thankfully could contain. It was a warm enticing evil infiltrating the very air around them. The changed atmosphere effectively frightening the weak whilst undermining the strength of the mighty. The will of Zohex and Ahriman. How did the vanished priest fit into this mad house? He still could not accept the idea that he had been a ghost. This side or that.

Surrounded by an iron ring of eyes staring intimidatingly from his chiefs, Zohex's mane of long black hair blew agitated in the gentle breeze. A vision of muscular strength sitting proudly on the glowing throne. His brawny hand made the slightest of motions. From the temple emerged two priests dressed in their sombre garb. They were dragging a reluctant victim towards their king.

She was tall, slender her hair as raven black as Zohex's. Her clothes torn tattered fragments of blooded linen revealing her mutilations. A golden band of worked metal still crowned in mockery her once exemplary loftiness of her birth. Bahnum recognised Mudhan nearly fainting. Quickly sympathisers around him grabbed a steadying hold. It was a favourite ruse of Zohex to flush out any who might reveal compassion for this or any other captive. Such an act of kindness meant he would thus be destined for sacrifice in Vahnsin's dungeon temple.

Mudham's arms were roughly bound behind her. Her skin smeared with blood and gore. Her eyes large and dark. The glow of the unhinged. As she was led into the open square she smiled with an absolute vacuous expressed on her face.

"This woman," Zohex bellowed his voice reverberating over the hushed gathering, "is the proudest and most obstinate of all. The haughtiness of her tribe is nothing but a child's dreamy revenge against those of superior strength and far seeing wisdom. No complacent herders of cattle have the right to rule." Zohex cheered by his faithful lords.

"I offer her to any man who is capable of winning her. He who undertakes this task must bow not only to me but to our god Ahriman and take the vow of obedience by his own blood. An oath of life and death he will take placing his head under my foot. He who does this shall be given this slave." And smiled maliciously at the respective gathering.

Bahnum wished to free this woman but knew Zohex was merely indulging in tempting the rebellious. The grim courtyard remained encased in a sullen stifling silence. The tension rose, the stillness continued with Zohex's eyes sparkling in triumph. He had so mutilated the body and mind of Mudhan with such purposeful intent that none of his cronies would want her. The priests would sacrifice her to Ahriman and she would be no more. For the offer was to his chiefs only.

"Your haughtiness seems to have diminished." He sniggered to the cautious laughter of his chieftains. Mudhan fell to the ground as if fatally wounded. Her life was not over but already greedy death hovered near giving immense pleasure to the delight of Zohex's sadistic indulgences. Two brutal hands lifted her by her torn clothing as Mudhan went limp. Zohex laughed in open mockery at them all.

Bahnum thought he had heard her cries of agony which bombarded his seething mind muffled finally by the corrupting darkness inside the lurid Cimmerian temple. And then came the vision.

For a moment the sun turned black illuming even then all in its deathlike wan of unearthly shadows. Swirling around the adumbrate sun were dripping rivers of blood drenching the swarthy fort with the ichor of the Turanians. They the hyaline fluid of this pernicious race who had been spawned by hideous monstrosities this world. The deities of Bahnum's reality remained silent as this miasma, this decay spread its filth across the land, poisoning the minds of the living. Lurid scenes of distorted life glared insanely at Bahnum trying to suffocate his life in this nighted crypt.

When he opened his eyes he saw friends leaning over him. Bahnum had blacked out. He rose fitfully and remembered his clouded apparition whence he had seen more than just the innards of the temple.

Around him the chiefs were beginning to disperse. Mounting their horses made ready in adjacent galleries they rode out for further conquest and plunder more booty. Others stayed behind to take delight in the obscure pleasures Zohex bequeathed upon his loyal followers. Bahnum steadied by friends stood uneasily. In the silence they returned to their distant camp.

Things had changed significantly for Bahnum. Without any clues as to the vanished duplicitous rinpoche he was forced to acknowledge what he was doing here. He knew whose side he was on. His mind depressed. Nature devoid of vitality. His world so recently full of promise was now shadowed by a reality of a recreant and mournful oppression. Forms of sinister corrupting annihilation swam in frantic profusion around him as he lay, depleted of energy and willpower in their camp.

Yet the Elders he had spoken to had told him of his quest. Mudhan's sacrifice would be avenged. A defiant fire raged through him beneath this ocean of despair. Zohex Bahnum concluded was a resurrection of a leering lycanthropic madness, a potent incarnate frenzied magic.

Bahnum was convinced of a lurking sacrament of evil which hounded the weaker of their kind. Plaguing them with unwanton visions and torturous feelings of fear, despair and wretchedness. In this distant advent zone of twilight urges, trends and unnatural patterns of life forced down an impious track of utter degeneration. This land was possessed by an awful fate swallowing their dissolute souls into an abyss of perditionous contagion. The priests of the Turanians were creating a veritable foetus of hybrid pestilence gnawing eagerly of their own decaying minds.



### New Delhi

Surat squeezed out of the tiny three wheeled motorized rickshaw paying an extra rupee to the compliant Sikh. Dusting his tweed jacket and arranging his loin cloth about his ample waist he squinted at the glaring sky above. He eyed about him the misbirth of nineteenth century British inspired colonial architecture with extreme distaste.

Like some wasting disease the buildings were covered with a profusion of signs, doors, peeling paint and crumbling masonry. Stepping onto the dusty footpath he was immediately besieged, surrounded and inundated with shouting street hawkers who incessantly tried to ply their goods. Dismissing them like bothersome insects he came to the conclusion that New Delhi had none of the colourful splendour and friendly noisome charm of his hometown Varanasi. Not just the peeling buildings but the architectural disarray, the grimy urban sprawl offended his eyes as he roamed about for Abu Jahal's antiquarian bookshop.

He watched a few hippies pass by and wondered how their affluent society could tolerate such filthy scum. Their habits an affront to any civilised human being. Small children clung around him demanding baksheesh, older boys wanted to shine his shoes even though he was wearing sandals in the scorching heat of the premonsoon.

Connought Circuit should have been named Connought Circus for he circumnavigated it against his will several times, the result of inspired British city planning. It was upon his third attempt that he finally found the small sooty entrance of the bookshop. No wonder for in fading Hindi and English he saw the small placard announcing the office of his destination.

Inside an even denser atmosphere engulfed him, constricting his breathing. Surat stumbled along the dark narrow hallway feeling claustrophobic, something which never occurred in the densely packed bazaars of Varanasi. Slowly his eyes accustomed themselves to the ill lit cave like tunnels impregnated with a strong smell of decay. Small offices were around him, most of them disused, others shut for the daily siesta. At last he found the place and creaking open a door he entered the bookshop. In a large badly lit room with bared windows Surat saw a small lean haggard and bespectacled man rise from his cluttered desk, greeting him in a crawling uncomfortable manner.

“What service may I be to you?” he cringed in front of Surat whose waning confidence returned as he was twice the man physically whom he confronted. Answering in English he announced himself and thanked him for the copy of his book. The small frail face lit up nodding his head simultaneously whilst offering him a rickety wooden chair. Books were piled high in this hot grey room lit by two dusty neon tubes dangling from make shift wires which showed up the water stained ceiling. Offered the customary cup of tea Surat accepted. A street urchin appeared. The thin man rattled off the order, the boy scampered away.

“You follow the ancient traditions?” the timid looking creature asked meekly. Surat surveyed the old manuscripts and dank books covering the walls on sagging bookshelves reaching the blotchy ceiling.

“The history of our ancient culture has always fascinated me.” He answered non-committally. Silence followed in typical oriental fashion. No mention was made about the actual visit.

“I have much to offer.” The husk of a man continued almost sinking into his chair with some demeanour. Surat purposely failed to follow the drift of the man’s ideas.

“The great work of knowledge, of discovery so to speak is all but forgotten. I have few customers,” He sadly complained, “and apart from selling the usual copies of the Vedas or the Ghita or some Muslim tracts most of these books lie in darkness reflecting the spirit of the age which surrounds them.”

”Kali Yuga.” Surat exhaled quietly.

“Ah yes.” The little man sighed pathetically. “This is so. The Age of Iron and Darkness, of ignorance. The winds of Maya reign victorious over the entire globe. But soon they will blow away the dead chaff to allow new seeds to take hold and mature.” Eyeing him with the assiduousness of a bird of prey. Surat was surprised at such wanton intellectual brashness. Sensing this the other continued, “I knew you were involved in the Great Work.”

Taken slightly aback with the affront caused by this insight he wondered for a moment the man might wish to take a bribe. For truly the great epic and Herculean task of grasping the secrets from ancient gods was somewhat forbidden.”

“It is part of my academic research to dwell into the mystery of how the mind unravels the knowledge it discovers no matter how unusual these sources may be.” He answered almost honestly.

“No doubt. Such acquired knowledge must be preserved even if it is forgotten and not practiced.” The bespectacled man continued.

The urchin returned with two small clay cups filled with hot sweet milk tea which he carefully posited on a small vacant space on the overcrowded desk. The boy received his fifty paisa then ran off in a flash. Handing a cup to his visitor he continued:

“Knowledge is priceless. It is precious beyond measure. True knowledge can conquer the mightiest empires without the use of direct force. You have studied the book I sent you?”

“I have briefed through it merely at a glance. It is a facsimile is it not?”

“It is indeed it is indeed.” The small man answered thoughtfully. “But it is a faithful reproduction, the original cannot be found.”

It is probably in this room Rana thought to himself.

“And even this facsimile I am sure you appreciate is the last of its kind, at least in India.”

“That we will never know.” Rana slurped his hot tea.

“Be assured kind sir I tell the truth. My reputation as a man of honest business principles demand my integrity to be faultless. Since my life is devoted to the great work as I have indicated I am sure the price is very reasonable considering the rarity of the work itself. Few of the learned have ever heard or seen such a stupendous and possibly exciting book.”

Rana set down to bargaining with this keeper of books which displeased the shopkeeper immensely.

“Normally Mr Surat,” he said with a piercing frigidness which Rana decided to ignore as one of the many shifting moods of this person, “it is customary to bargain but here I must take exception. I had sent the book to you in good faith and you have done me the honour by returning here to Delhi. But even at the nominated price which I consider more than generous I must insist we do not haggle as if this merchandise was

hawked by some peasant in a provincial market. I hope I have not been offensive but you must see my point. This rarity is above the bartering of the market place. It is far too precious to be so demeaned and devalued.”

“And how do I know you have not such others such facsimiles as this?” Abu looked deeply offended.

“You may search my shop, even my house.” And with swift abruptness his attitude changed. Uncanny. “I will tell you a secret.” His glasses momentarily white from the dim overhead neon. “A friend of mine found it in a market outside this country and graciously sent me this copy for a similar price. I have learnt also of your interest by another lucky breakthrough both dear to our hearts. Something recently discovered...oh Mister Surat you need not look so startled. To those who can read between the lines to put it metaphorically the revelations of these peculiar events should not come as a surprise. Surely you understand that at least. As a respected companion in this, our parallel sojourn you appreciate the worth of any true book of knowledge no matter where it is discovered or what it purports so graphically to portray. Remember in the past men have died for daring even less.” Falling into a profound silence whilst Rana fingered the five hundred rupees inside his jacket.

“I have brought the money.” Rana blurted out, “Since I first had wished to make your acquaintance and ascertain your impeccable honesty.”

The other sipped his tea.

“Here is an advance of five hundred.” Clumsily he put the folded notes onto the table. Without counting the bundle the money disappeared into his folded grey tunic.

“I trust you will send me the remainder by the end of next month. And please if you cannot meet the payment, let me know.” Smiling sinisterly. Rana thought the man a

terrible actor who took his role a little too seriously. But that was the way of human nature he urbanely reasoned to himself. If the man wished to act then two could play that game, even if it was not cricket.

“Rest assured,” Rana retorted majestically, “I will not deviate from the bargain we have struck.” What an open ended lie he thought. The little thief most probably had a few more such manuscripts. The price he had paid more than adequate. The gods were on his side and in an elated mood, bidding a courteous goodbye Rana left the damp rotting premises.

The tall severe ashen face of Jamin emerged from a second adjoining office, entering Jahal’s cluttered bookshop.

“I think he means to keep the rest of the money.” Jamin said with pleasure.

“I hope he does. It will alleviate my conscience.” Abu smiled with devilish contentment.

“You? A conscience?” And they both laughed heartily. “I will keep watch. Neither of them will be able to resist the invocations in the book.”

“Yes, it was lucky for you to find the book in Peshawar. But how did you manage to discover it in the first place? I do not wish to know but it fascinates me how certain things fall into our hands.” Meaning both the book and Surat.

“One day I will let you into that secret. But first let us hope the experiment with which we have whetted their appetite will be successful.”

“Yes. To practice the arts according to well known ancient rites such as ours is one thing. But to try the ways of powerful and unknown remnants such as this, with so little guidance is something else. If they are successful then our work will be that much

easier and of a much shorter duration. Then again, if they fail we will be safe from the retribution they may suffer. But we must still be cautious.” A little smirk across Abu’s thin lips.

“And,” Jamin added his voice merry and melodious, “we know of their little games they play with Kali. I’m certain our friend will pay the agreed price. His position at the university, his prestige within his social circles would not allow a scandal or say an unfortunate accident. And since our modern laws do not allow or even account for occult phenomena, a self inflicted injury will be deemed as misadventure. But we need not anticipate these things for now do we?”

“Indeed not Jamin.”

“I will go to Benares and keep in touch.”

“What about the others?”

“In Nepal?”

“They are nothing in comparison to our friend here. Being academically minded our western guides will blatantly misinterpret their discoveries and thus misdirect any attention away from the source. It will be just what we need, a good respectable smoke screen.”

“That is excellent.” Jamin said. “Even if they do discover more.”

“That does not bother me. They will either see it as a typical superstition we Asiatics are supposedly steeped in or they will be anthropomorphically minded and paternalistic to boot. They are from the west and their so called scientific methods will blind them from the truth of our reality. It is good that this is so. No, we have little to fear from their researches. I will see you soon then Jamin.”

“Wait I will come into the street and help you to safely deposit this money.”

“Very wise. Let us go then.”

They both knew Rana Surat had taken the bait which pleased them immensely.

### **West Berlin**

Rudolf Zimmerman was not in a good mood. The long flight from California to West Berlin via New York and Frankfurt was arduous enough. Though the summons had been entirely unexpected to return to Europe at such short notice it could not have come at a worst time. At least he had learnt enough in the US to know where to take his ailing



electronics company in Koenigstein. The Americans ingenious as always were developing a new generation of what they termed 'user friendly' computers. The restructuring of his company from manufacturing outdated electronics components to entering the cutting edge of this new micro technology would be the next major challenge if he were to retire a rich man. And in the midst of all this came the call from the countess. The seriousness of the situation demanded his presence.

Flying over the motley green checkerboard patches of the eastern zone. Returning to the centre of their operation after a spell outside Europe he was not so inclined to believe the mission the countess had, way back then in post war Germany instilled in him. Europe was not the world it once had been.

Neither was he so imbued with her odd if not archaic view of the universe, where the soul, whatever that was, just a mental configuration crafting the real world to him. She thinking it a repository of untapped energy. Convinced the mind-soul a powerful psychologically applied tool.

Under threat or so she believed. But had it been otherwise throughout history? After all to Zimmerman power groups both overt and more importantly covert had always riddled every culture, every society. Conspiracies never ceased. So this one presumably was no different. Just one with a different twist.

The Pan Am turbo prop began its sudden descent towards Tempelhof, West Berlin's main airport. Right in the middle. The city hung under a pale photochemical smog. It cloaked the high rise buildings in a hazy romantic hue. This the uncritical gaze of the artist in him. The price of industrial success. And the life style that went with it.

Good quality whisky always unleashed a torrent of unconnected thought processes in him. It cleansed the imposed discipline of his positivist rationalism which often lead into tangential dead ends.

Enough of this mental coagulation. He was probably suffering from information overload. As his ears popped with the rapid approach he felt more optimistic knowing his work was helping to shape the future technologically. The potential of the computer verging on the infinite. A pleasant end in itself but more importantly it would possess amounts of data so vast the mind could only be boggled at the prospects instore regarding its applications. Data equalling power.

Having cleared customs in the vast glassy post modernist architectural heroics of Tempelhof airport the first thing he smelt outside was the pollution, no worse than LA. In front of the terminal the familiar monument to the air lift, inspiring in its simplicity. In memory of the fallen. For this city it was not an abstract indulgence. It was a concrete fact lived daily.

Early afternoon. The sky drab making the blocks of flats looked washed out. Traffic was sparse so acquiring a taxi was not a problem. Marvelling at Berlin's affluence riding in a Mercedes far more common here than state side. They weaved past the ubiquitous cream yellow double decker buses, shiny new VW's, Audis, BMWs. Gliding on well sealed roads heading towards his private unit to the south west in Gruenewald. Feeling comfortable again surrounded by the urbanity of the place whereas American cities were flat expanses of endless dysfunctional suburbs.

The block where he lived set in a planned park, the road well back. Serenity.

Home. His cleaning lady Karlotta, a German refugee from the old Prussia maintained his three roomed apartment on the fifth floor keeping it spotless. He drew

back the curtains enjoying the view over the vast Furst Gruenewald from whence the suburb received its name. In the distance the Havel river spreading over the low lands meandering into a series of interconnecting lakes. Further afield the haze formed an opaque layer of smog. Then the East. As impenetrable as the fog.

The DDR. A pernicious state cynical in its oppression legitimised by the regressive semanticisms of the counter revolutionaries, disgruntled left wing intellectuals along with the over hyped rantings of frustrated intolerant political splinter groups running amok in the West. The European intelligencia was morally corrupt.

Zimmerman agitated by his memories, pacing the large living room, wanted another drink to calm down. He went to the cabinet and poured himself a generous Bummerlunder no ice. Lighting a panatella he undid his shoes and reclined in an easy chair staring at the washed out sky. Pondering whether to get in touch with Kurt Metzger when the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and settled himself once more.

“I’m glad you’re in Rudolf. How’s everything?”

“Just got back from the States. Even thinking of getting in touch with you. I’ve got a command invitation from the countess. So what’s in the breeze so to speak.”

“Plenty. In fact if you’re up to it I’d rather see you first.”

“Sure. I’m just having a drink. Join me please. Are you alright? You don’t sound it.”

“I’m not.”

“Nothing serious I hope?”

“I’ll see you within the hour then.” Kurt hanging up. Feeling a sudden pang of foreboding.

Rudolf downed the schnapps and poured another. His stomach in a vice. Damn all this. It was beginning to take its toll on him. He sighed. No way out. They were all committed and that was that. Angrily he finished his drink waiting for the smooth soothing alcohol to have its inevitable effect. Slowly beginning to feel a little better. Wanting to get drunk and get to work on his new project mapped out for his company.

He went into the eat in kitchen opening the fridge. He retrieved some cold meats, gherkins, herrings and a Pilsener which he poured into a tall elegant beer glass. He set the table for himself and Kurt, went back to the living room, picked up the Bummerlunder and his panatella and returned to the kitchen.

Waiting at the table he wondered uselessly what could be bothering Kurt. It could be anything really. Set backs were part of the scene. Linear progress in achieving their goals simply never eventuated and when they did it often was a trap backfiring on their enemies. Not unlike the business world. Things were never straight forward or easy.

The first beer vanished before he knew it and rose to get another. How good his cleaning lady was, stocking the fridge with decent beer.

The intercom buzzed and setting the glass down answered. Kurt downstairs. Well that was quick. He buzzed him into the building, removed the latch from the front door, opening it. Upon hearing the lift arrive he waited anxiously for his friend. Kurt dressed impeccably as always was walking slowly down the carpeted hallway. Not looking his ebullient self. Rudolf sensed trouble.

“Welcome back.” He said. His eyes withdrawn, sad. He looked tired, worn out. ‘It’s getting to him too.’ Rudolf thought but said nothing.

“Come in come in.” They shook hands. “So what have you got for me?”

“In a moment. Where are we sitting?”

“In the kitchen. I’ve made us a little snack. Take off your coat. A bit chilly this autumn.”

“You’ve just returned from a warmer climate.” Kurt’s face lit up when he saw the spread on the kitchen table. “Beer and Bummerlunder. Dufte.” Though his joviality was a little forced. “How were the States?”

“The usual. Brash, confident, dynamic. Anyhow have a seat. I’ll pour. One of each then?”

“Please.”

Rudolf did the honours. Once settled their eyes met.

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Good news or bad news. Bad news first then.”

Kurt let out a deep sigh.

“Johann Brauner died in hospital in Australia.”

“What?!”

“There’s more. One of our people in place, a Dr Samuel Parry came to a very strange end. Suicide apparently. Which doesn’t make sense. Dark forces are gathering.”

Zimmerman looked at Kurt aghast. Forgetting his beer.

“This is terrible, terrible.” He said shaking his head. Kurt downed his beer ,  
Rudolf refilled.

“What is happening?” He asked uselessly.

“Apparently Brauner had some sort of mental collapse and died in hospital. As for Dr Parry’s suicide...” Kurt trailed off lost for words.

Rudolf was stunned looking at Kurt, then the bread and herrings as Kurt looked out the window.

“What is going in I ask you, tell me.”

Kurt merely shrugged his shoulders as if to say: ‘you know how it is.’

“Is that why the command invitation?”

“I think so.” Helping himself to some bread and salami.

“This has to be premeditated. It just has to.” Rudolf ventured trying to find some sort of rationale behind these tragedies.

“We think the valley is cursed.”

“What valley?”

“The Napier.” Rudolf looked at Kurt blankly. “In Australia.”

“Ah there.” Downing his shotglass of schnapps. Kurt followed suit. Rudolf repoured. “Cursed did you say?” Kurt merely nodded. “In the twentieth century? It does not make sense.”

“I am afraid it does my friend.” Taking a long draught of his beer. Rudolf shaking his head trying to understand. Their world was tilting out of equilibrium. Rapidly it seemed.

“We have just begun this project. How could anybody have known?”

“Unless it was us who stumbled across something.” Kurt suggested. “I think we will have to get in touch with that research student who is working with Maximillian. That is how it all started you know.” Kurt explained.

“I didn’t know that.” Helping himself to more herring, thinking furiously.

“That’s just it. We were following precarious leads, as always. Not even thinking this would go anywhere in particular. But there you have it.”

“Pardon me Kurt. I don’t know about you but are we in any danger, personally?”

“We always have been, why do you ask?”

“No what I mean is have we become individual targets?”

“I hope not. I think the countess will give us an urgent update. She is making enquiries.”

“No doubt.” Rudolf said abstractly. “Have something to eat.”

“I suppose I should. The schnapps is making me feel better, more relaxed. Mind if I pour myself?”

“Please, don’t wait for me.”

Kurt made himself a smorgasbord but only nibbled his food.

“I’ve been away. What do you think is going on?”

“It’s all academic at the moment. Our Indian friend has found an ancient tablet. We have this pre-deluvian manuscript and that is about it. Plus this lead to the cursed valley.”

“There has to be something else. I mean are we barking up the wrong tree? Should we be in Australia at all? Is it connected?”

Another emphatic shrug from Kurt. He loosened his tie.

“You mean get at the source and root it out?”

“Naturally.”

“What if it’s a trap?”

“Then we shut it.”

“Maybe that’s just it.”

“What are you getting at?”

“To us it’s a trap. I’m certain. But I do not think we should use European logic to get to the bottom of this. Use Asian logic if you like. Approach it obliquely.”

“Obliquely.” Rudolf laughed ruefully.

“Think of chess for a moment. The queen is the most powerful piece on the board but the king is everything.”

“A diversion?”

“That is what the countess is thinking.”

“Who then? The Ruskies?”

“Ah.” A gleam lit Kurt’s eyes. It could have been the schnapps. “Your favourite subject. Psychotronic warfare?”

Rudolf merely nodded his head and busied himself with another herring on his black bread.

“We cannot discount it.”

“Certainly. But there might be other possibilities you know.”

“Not neo-fascism. That is dead and buried and what has been resurrected is a political joke.”

“True enough. What about the Muslim Brotherhood?”

“Bunch of retrogrades psychologically speaking. Stuck in the middle ages.”

“Exactly. Look at Khomeini.”

“In the Muslim crescent maybe. But Australia?”

“To be sure, yes. Still the brotherhood is anti-secular. And that entails all sorts of problems.”

“But can we be sure?”

“Nothing is certain Rudolf you know that.”

“I know.” He said resignedly, sipping his Pilsner. “But could it be that certain members trained in the Soviet Union are behind this? It is rumoured some of them are



assassins. The ancient order might have been resurrected except that this time these assassinations are done telepathically.”

“And Australia because of its distant location was used as a test case?”

“Makes some sense.”

“But all indications suggest no one of any significance is down there.”

“Maybe so, but what if it had been orchestrated in the Middle East instead?”

“As a point of origin? Heaven forbid.”

“Apparently it has heaven’s sanction.”

“If that is the case things look bad, very bad indeed.”

The telephone rang. Rudolf rose and went into the living room answering it. He affirmed the message then hung up.

“That was the countess.”

Kurt’s eyes questioning him.

“We are still meeting at twenty one hours. You want to stay here or go back home first?”

“I think I’ll go back, freshen up, clear the brain a little.” Kurt said rising from the kitchen table. Rudolf helped him on with his coat.

“This conspiracy theory of hers. I can understand that Moscow has its global agenda, no doubt about that. But this darker side of things...” he trailed off. “I mean ever since the Nazis and their absurd obsession with the occult it seems to have become a fixe idee with her and us.”

“I know what you mean. But you have to admit things seem to be getting out of hand.” Rudolf said placatingly. They walked to the entrance of the unit. “I too am a little

sceptical about her view of the world and the way things are going. You must admit though there are forces involved which are well and truly...different."

"As in?"

"Hidden. History is littered with secret societies wielding a disproportionate amount of power."

"And they generally fail."

"Those yes. But how many are operational? That is our interest after all."

"I know." Kurt despondent again. "I think we should let them run their course so they can self destruct."

"How?"

"Mental entropy. They are closed systems you know."

"What if that has changed? What if they have become an open system, cosmic in scale?"

"You really think that is possible? Something greater than the Mephistophelian syndrome?"

"The countess is convinced."

"I hope not. Anyway see you tonight."

"Tonight then." They shook hands Rudolf shutting the front door lost in thought. He felt less than confident.

A drizzling cold rain descended over the city. The colourful neon signs of Stadt Mitte were washed into a profusion of kaleidoscopic halos. The Mercedes taxi halted in front of his destination in Kolner Strasse. Securing his hat and squeezing his thick woollen coat about him Zimmerman hurried to the entrance pressing the intercom.

Identifying himself he was let into the spacious hallway. The central heating was stifling as he brushed off the damp from his coat and hat. One of two lifts vacant. He ascended to the third floor with no idea who else would be there. But then again the countess had innumerable contacts here.

A solidly built butler took his coat and hat as Rudolf entered the old world spacious apartment. The height of the ceiling alone more than his. The living room embellished with gilded baroque furniture. A bright chandelier created flashes of bright lustrous light.

The butler announced his arrival. Rudolf saw Kurt in deep conversation with a stranger. The countess dressed simple yet elegant looking very nineteen twenties. Wearing a tuxedo adorned with a simple silver broach. Her hair severally brushed back heightening her Slavic cheekbones which enhanced her dark eyes. She was sitting in the centre of the room smoking a Turkish cigarette from a long silver and ivory holder. Rudolf went over to her and kissed the white skin of her raised hand.

There was a sadness in her eyes which communed adequately the tragedy that had befallen them. Another butler, equally built like a powerhouse offered on a silver tray a large cocktail. Rudolf nodded his appreciation. A chamber orchestra was playing Renaissance music on the stereo. The mood was sombre but not depressing. The drinks would see to that. Seeing the countess was smoking he lit a panatella.

“Thank you for coming.” She said as if he would consider an alternative.

“Countess I am always at your service.” Bowing a little.

“May I introduce to you Viktor Fadeyev.”

From the corner of the living room towards a large ceiling sized window where a buffet had been prepared and other strangers talked in whispers a tall urbane man dressed in a business suit advanced slowly towards them. Kurt followed.

The countess did the introductions. Another Russian émigré Rudolf thought. He was wrong.

“Professor Fadeyeyv is on a cultural exchange visit from Moscow.” She smiled at them both, then took a drag on her cigarette. Blowing the smoke over their heads.

Viktor bowed to the countess then shook hands with Rudolf.

“Herr Zimmerman.” He said with a thick Slavic accent in English. “It is a pleasure.”

“Professor likewise. What is your field of research if I may ask?”

“You may.” Viktor smiled expansively. “I work with our religious department. What the Americans would call ‘comparative belief systems’.”

“You are giving lectures?”

“At the Humboldt University.”

“So they let you across.”

“For cultural purposes. I have a minder so that I will not get lost or get into any mischief.” He smiled, gold teeth gleaming, sipping his cocktail. “The countess as you are no doubt aware has certain contacts through her foundation with our people’s government. You understand. She may have moved but her heart is in the right place.” Viktor looking at her pleasantly. She returned the gesture. “Our research is similar. Our government even shares certain low level information. Your little group is held in high esteem in Moscow.”

“Indeed an honour to have us.” Rudolf replied non-plussed. The countess watching him.

“Which brings me to the point of this meeting.” She finished their conversation. “Gentlemen, if you please.”

The living room fell silent. The renaissance music turned down pleasantly.

“Please be seated.” It was obviously going to be a lecture. They made themselves comfortable on ornate antique chairs. The countess attentive as ever with blazing eyes kept her sight hovering amongst them. Rudolf and Kurt had gotten used to her look as if she were in some heightened trance her breathing barely perceptible. The two butlers removed the stylus from the record. Silence in the brightly lit room.

Chairs surrounding her, her audience, she began the peroration.

“We are in grief. The unfortunate demise of our great friend Kurt Brauner is a blow to us all. As is his comrade Samuel Parry. Two dedicated kameraden who worked tirelessly and selflessly for our great cause. The forces of darkness are once again contaminating this planet and its people. We believed by investigating certain occurrences we might obviate this pestilence. Unfortunately we were checked. May their souls rest in peace.” She stopped. Kurt sipped his martini, Rudolf smoked distractedly. Wondering about the Russian who had a butler replenish his drink.

Then the surprise. She nodded to Viktor to begin.

“When the great Lenin promised autonomy in regard to our southern Muslim neighbours he made a tactical mistake. Coming from a convinced communist like myself this may sound like heresy, revisionism or deviationism if you like.”

Rudolf half turned but his minder was stony faced standing with the butlers.

“Comrade Stalin for all his perceived faults reversed that unfortunate decision. The Muslim faith is unlike any other. Superficially it has a common bond with both Judaism and Christianity. And there it stops. It is not so much the Muslim faith per se that is the problem. It is what it contains. Comrade Brezhnev concurs. Unfortunately the American president does not. He has a simplistic view of international affairs. The superciliousness of the Baptist believing in some sort of inane human goodness.”

“Leaving that aside for the moment a problem our respective political departments will have to deal with we know a far more serious problem has arisen, or to put it into perspective, recurred. Several years ago we discovered an obscure Sufi sect operating in our Uzbek Republic. Their leader whom we identified as Pir Syed Ahmadel-Gailini claims to be the direct descendent of the prophet Mohammed. His sect of which he is the leader is the Quadiya. We believe they helped engineer the overthrow of the Shah and install Khomeini. Now they never work in total isolation nor is this the first time they acted. Militant Sufis originally surfaced in the nineteen twenties. One such group was the Sufi Brotherhood known as the Tariqa. For these people national differences mean nothing and religious distinctions are deliberately honed for their nefarious ends.”

“The Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1929 by Hasan al-Banna opposed the regime of King Farouk of Egypt with the inevitable consequences. In 1948 they assassinated the Prime Minister Mokrashy Pasha. By 1952 Nasser had driven them underground instigating a diaspora. They spread to Syria and Iraq with strands in eastern Turkey and finally infiltrating our southern republics. But with the rise of Khomeini things suddenly changed. The Great Satan was in their eyes not just the United States but

also the Socialist Soviet Republics. To cover their tracks the Iranians off loaded the sects just like Hitler had done with the Brownshirts. That is the geo politics.”

He finished his martini and received another. The countess stubbed out her Turkish cigarette and lit another. Intent on Viktor.

“The danger is not just to us it is to the world. In Iraq there is the Al-Dawa, the Call if Islam which is connected with Hezbollah. Their leaders studied at Najf influenced by Baqir al-Sadr and Khomeini of course. Our problem is not dissimilar to what had occurred in Vietnam. Fighting an invisible enemy. Why do you think we sanction the right of Israel to exist? The answer of course is obvious even if it is not always endorsed at plenums in the United Nations.”

“Then in the last few years things got out of control. The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines, the Kurds in Turkey, the rise of Hezbollah are all manifestations of this rising curse. It is best summed up I think by the Brazilian Revolutionary Carlos Marighella who recently published a book in your country. If I remember he commanded the destruction of any islands of wealth in the third world. The resultant chaos and misery this causes is fodder to these people. Unfortunately these islands of wealth include us. The future of our two civilisations are at stake here. These movements are primarily anti-secular. We are witnessing the birth of a new dark age.”

His martini half way now.

“Are you offering to share information?” Rudolf asked. He did not trust this Russian or any for that matter. The brutality of the wall a living testimony to their way of solving problems.

“Collaboration. We in the Soviet Union take a larger view of things than some of your comrades. In our intellectual circles the study of parapsychology is respected, not

disparaged. It is we who can help you more than you can help us.” Viktor replied easily, draining his martini and offered another. The room was getting warmer.

“But if you are leaders in this field of research why come to us?” Rudolf persisted.

“We have a slight problem.” Breezy smile. “We believe the next assault is Afghanistan. The information we have suggests that recently there had been a meeting of minds. Specifically Islamic minds. We believe Ali Shariati of Iran, Mohammad Qotub of Egypt and Abdul Maududi of Pakistan, all fundamentalist scholars had just had a meeting in the province of Balkh. They are planning or laying the foundations for the overthrow of the Afghani government.”

“With due respect Viktor, you must admit the government there was basically inserted by your own people.” Rudolf reminded him. He lit a panatella.

“Afghanistan is an isolated and backward country. Naturally the people will be feudal in outlook. Imposing a pseudo socialist government like yours is, like everywhere else resented. That is a fact your people never seem to comprehend. Your vision of history, the dialectical imperative of historical forces being the natural evolutionary apotheosis is simply resisted. Not its theoretical basis but as always its practical application.” Rudolf hammered home.

Viktor held up his squat brawny hand. “Please. Spare me the polemics. I have come here in good faith. It is not easy to arrange a meeting like this no matter how unofficial. So let me be direct. Afghanistan is we believe the next target.”

“What about Australia?” Kurt asked.

“What about it?” Viktor surprised.

“Countess?” Kurt looking at her. She seemed to come out of her trance state.



“We think it is an aberration. A test run.”

“A local affair?” Kurt continued. “I mean it has cost several lives already. Surely that is not normal. Otherwise why was my friend sent there?” Kurt feeling emotive. “Was it all a waste then including his life and that of Dr Parry?”

“No life was wasted Kurt. We think it is a ruse. Australia does not make sense. I mean why bother? The population is basically of European stock. The few Muslims or other fringe religions there are nothing compared to what is happening in the northern hemisphere.”

“And what about the aborigines then? There are several hundred thousand of them.”

“Scattered across the continent. We believe that what occurred in Australia belongs to the greater scheme of things. A manifestation yes, but not a cause. Of that we feel certain. But given the tragic loss of life incurred we also believe that observation might be a better approach. We have people in place there. Johann Brauner went there because it was thought that given the uniqueness of certain symptoms there this disease might be laid bare. It seemed like a perfect study in isolation.”

“A controlled experiment?” Kurt guessed.

“Indeed.”

“And?”

“And what?” The countess replied quietly.

“Would it not make sense to go there like my friend had and nip it in the bud? After all psychic phenomena are supposed to be interconnected. Destroy it there and the root cause, wherever it is, is annihilated.”

“An interesting point. That is why Viktor is here.” Then turning to her guest asked him to continue.

“I think we have found it.” He lit a strong dark cigarette. “Which as I have just said is Afghanistan. You have to also remember that what is happening there is happening in Africa every day. Voodoo killings are part of the norm on that continent. And like Australia it has no overall impact on the structure of things. Australia will not be destabilised by those bizarre events. Unlike Africa which is so unstable the two opposites meet so to speak. An interesting scenario wouldn’t you say?”

“Is that why East German and Cuban troops are in Angola or Mozambique or Namibia, to stabilise voodoo Africa?” Kurt continuing his assault. The countess expressionless. Viktor could look after himself.

“To a degree that is our interest in the third world. Which we share.” Looking at the countess for confirmation who registered the remark with a slight tilt of her head.

“So geopolitics, mineral exploration, military bases are just a cover.” Kurt said dismissively, “And,” continuing in the same vein, “the voodoo priests there are threatening to return if your troops leave?”

“Kurt. That is enough. We are here for a specific reason. I am sorry our colleague and his friend have died. But let us keep things in perspective.” Then turning to Viktor she asked him to continue. Kurt was flushed from the heady cocktails but decided to have another anyway. He did not trust the Russian and with hindsight should have kept his counsel. What he had basically elucidated was known fact. The last thing anybody wanted was for Viktor go to on the defensive or retreat back over the wall into total obscurity.”

“That is my analysis. Afghanistan.”

“Well Kurt?” She challenged.

“I would prefer Australia. It’s more civilised. But I see Viktor’s point.” Having calmed down. “Obviously there is more going on than we know. Normal in such circumstances. My question is how we are going to tackle it. A joint expedition perhaps?”

“Perhaps not.” Viktor answered immediately. “Collaboration officially and in the open is out of the question.”

“Why?” Kurt now all innocence. The Russians knew more and wanted to keep it that way.

“Think man. If we collaborate on say an archaeological expedition the news would be broadcast worldwide. The political pundits would speculate a new thaw and your media would run with it. What we do not wish is for any publicity whatsoever. We will go into Afghanistan anyway but we were hoping you people would come too. Separately of course. The country is open to all foreign visitors, even hippies. See the ancient sites. And if we must meet then I suggest we do in a neighbouring country like say India or Pakistan. Anyway these are matters that can be resolved at a later stage.”

“Is there anything further you wish to discuss?” The countess asked more amiably.

“Let me get this in context.” Kurt began. “Viktor thinks on the information he has Afghanistan is vulnerable. He thinks essentially the danger is emanating from there through these Islamists or close by like say Iran. Australia as such falls into insignificance. Will there be any contact on an official basis then?” he finished.

“No not at this stage.” Viktor certain.

“And you suggest we send in our own little expedition as you will yours?” Kurt queried.

“Yes that might be so.”

“Countess I see no problems.” He did but this time kept his counsel.

“Thank you Kurt. Rudolf?”

“If the scenario is as Viktor suggests then I agree. Australia can always be covered later. And we should know soon enough if it gets out of control down there.”

“We are agreed then gentlemen?” The countess asked her eyes clear.

They assented.

“A toast.” Viktor suggested.

They had their glasses replenished.

“To the destruction of evil.”

They affirmed the toast and downed their glasses.

Zimmerman was cautious. Like Kurt he knew the Soviets. With them things were never what they seemed to be.

Jacko was not feeling right. His mind blank after the last summoning with Gertuk. For the first time, sitting near the burial site, he wondered at Gertuk's might. Using him to eliminate through this Dreamtime avengers his employer and his wife, subjected to murder then suicide. It made no sense to the whites, their death. He was used to dealing with that but this it seemed felt unnatural totally out of context. He was missing something. For he could not remember being anywhere near them. Only his dreaming spirit did.

He blinked, his eyes sticky and his body languid as if an ethereal fluid was coursing in his veins. Settling into him. Possession by the Dreamtime Spirits had never felt like this. They were usually light not this heavy. Though the heat could be exhausting this feeling which weighed upon him felt wrong. He was beginning to wonder who Gertuk really was. What was happening to him.

He rose from the sacred place of the sleeping medicine man's spirit. Everything around him peaceful. The still Outback air, the quiet, the trees like sentinels standing guard, watching, waiting. A cool breeze animated them then vanished as if wishing to avoid this place.

Gertuk had promised to cleanse the ancient land so that his tribe could rightfully repossess it. With the white man banished the land would be released from their foreign magic. Instead Jacko felt something else had arrived. Was Gertuk indeed the resurrection of Bahloo?

Someone was coming. He sensed it long before the light tread revealed another koorie. The other, a stranger and not one of the Pindar approached respectfully, laying down his hunting spears, squatting at a deferential distance. Jacko knew he was an elder. His short cropped hair slowly turning white his face jet black, shiny even in the dark. It

was a usual courtesy to bring something for a man of his stature. Although Jacko belonged to the Pindar by birth he had become a renegade in their eyes: a black medicine man. Jacko had no wish to dispel that image for the elders knew he had not practiced his magic upon them but upon the white man. That turned fear into respect. Jacko rose from his horizontal position and sat upright. His visitor maintained his distance.

“Bonelaya, the bat spirit.” Jacko said at last.

The other motioned his head to one side. There to his surprise were some roasted goannas. His awareness was slipping. He had to watch himself and not loose his grip.

“You have been elsewhere but I had no wish to disturb your sojourn. Every day I came to bring you food but your spirit was elsewhere. I see you have returned.”

Jacko remained silent. He realised if he had been in the Dreamtime he had no recollection of it. Gertuk must have totally possessed him, drawn out his soul.

“You cannot finish the white man here.” Bonelaya said.

“Maybe. The white man has only shallow magic.”

“But there are many of them. Their web is like that of a spider.”

“Except there is no spider, just the web.”

Bonelaya took out a small container, a hallowed out tree trunk. “You know what this is?” He asked matter of factly.

“Something sacred.”

“With this I have just returned from the Bralgu where the spirits dance forever.”

“The Land of the Dead, over the northern sea.”

Bonelaya nodded. “You are strong indeed.”

“My spirit guide is.”

Bonelaya nodded again. “They are concerned about what is happening here.”

“The Dreamtime is returning.”

“No.” was the assertive reply.

What Jacko had begun to suspect had been revealed to Bonelaya. This man deserved some consideration, goannas aside.

“You have been gone too long from your people. And the white man has inserted his magic into you.”

“Bahloo does not belong to the white man.”

“Ah yes, Bahloo.” He let the sentence float in the still night air.

“The Dancing Spirits of the Bralgu said this?”

Bonelaya nodded again. “Bahloo is in their thrall.”

“Whose, the white man?” Jacko flashing a smile. The thought was funny if not preposterous.

“Neither.”

It was what Jacko had begun to suspect.

“Spirits from beyond the Dreamtime. Evil spirits. Even your powers are no match for them.”

“Why evil? This land will soon be ours once again. For generations I have fought the white man’s invasion. And you say this is evil?”

“You have been there then?”

“I have no wish to be captured by them as you are.”

“It is I who have Bahloo.” For Jacko had no intention of even mentioning Gertuk. To know a name was to have possession of its spirit form.

“The Bralgu have given me a warning that if you continue then the land will die.”

“Die?”

“The spirits from beyond the Dreamtime will destroy everything so that they may take over. That is their aim and you are their vessel.”

“You have come to warn me?”

“The spirits know. They are eternal.”

“And they will stop me?”

“They are eternal.” Implying Jacko’s magic was not. “You are hungry.”

“No.” Bonelaya was saying his powers were just as strong as Jacko’s if not stronger. The man was warning him off his quest.

“You suggest I let the white man return and desecrate this sacred land of ours?”

“No. I suggest you banish the evil you have brought here.”

“The Pindar will not agree.”

“The Pindar are hoping to have their land returned to them. Their magic is weak and so see you as their saviour. But this evil you court will only destroy them and the white man.”

“So? With the land cleansed a new beginning can be made.”

“Yes, a new beginning. Is that their promise? It is no different than that of the white man’s religion. Empty promises with no spiritual substance. Except your evil spirits are much stronger and much more malignant. See for yourself, visit them if you dare. Discover their secrets and see if they will let you return.”

Jacko thought about this. Bonelaya had a point. So far he had only been visited by Gertuk and or Bahloo. And Jacko already had an inkling that the two were not quite the same.

“You have opened the sky and the evil has come. If you continue you will kill this land.”



“Bahloo protects us against those who would desecrate it.”

“The Spirits of Bralgu are unhappy. They have sent me to warn you. You have to stop this.”

“And let the white man win?”

“It is too late to get rid of the white man.”

“It is working here. They will not return. For them the land is cursed. It will have no value. But for us it will have its spirituality returned. The Dreamtime will be powerful enough for us to reclaim our heritage.”

“You are being fooled.”

“By Bahloo?”

“No, not Bahloo. Something far worse. The spirits have sent me to warn you as I have said. If you do not stop my magic will.”

“If your magic is so strong then why should we fight? Let us join forces instead of acting like enemies.”

It was Bonelaya’s turn to smile. “The spirits will not allow you to continue. They have warned me as I am warning you. Continue and you will die.” Bonelaya said with finality.

“I will go to Bahloo and seek his advice.”

“Don’t take too long for there is not much time. I will return with the next moon.”

And Bonelaya rose so quickly it seemed to Jacko the man turned into a blur. Before he knew it Bonelaya had vanished.

### **Moscow**

Konstantin Semenov was staring out of the window of his small two roomed flat. From the fifth floor in Kijevooskje Sosse of the Leninskij Prospect he watched the late night traffic. His writing desk littered with notes, old essays and academic texts. He returned to his typewriter, sheet in place and totally blank. His thoughts were not. He ran his hand through his thinning black hair.

In his early sixties he was currently pursuing ideas which guaranteed the exasperation of other scholars in his field. But then he had grabbed his opportunity with the thaw under Khrushchev. Climbing with his achievements as an assistant professor of

ancient history he felt himself drawn into an area of knowledge which was surreptitiously shunned by his fellow comrades. Nothing was said and Konstantin reasoned his current survival was due to the political and ideological winds of change which wafted through the labyrinthine corridors of the politburo. His peers had been trained in the iron days of Stalin. They were time servers who had contributed little to genuine research being more obsessed with ideological correctness. They had been intellectually saturated during that reign with its deadening utilitarian atmosphere hammered out under the banner of the universal advent of Soviet socialism.

And ironically enough it had worked. The Soviet people had been victorious. They had gained more than any other nation in Europe. Today they were a super power in their own right. At a price. In those distant days Konstantin had still been a child. He like millions of others had experienced the raging, bloody destructive war which had left the motherland a broken bleeding marasmus. And through the strength of the Russian people they had re-emerged from that terrible conflict stronger than ever. The capitalists were on the defensive now, running at best a holding operation. Or so their leaders told them.

Which was all well and good. But Konstantin thought there was more to it. Not the realpolitik but the forces driving it. Certainly a bright future awaited them all. But it was in those dangerous dark days something had changed his outlook of life. It was almost heretical.

Konstantin was not religious in any way. God if he did exist was a shit, a loser. World history had proven the infantile stupidity of monotheism and the sooner that was buried the sooner the future could be moulded not to some neolithic delusion but to the dictates of reason, forged by human scientific enlightenment.

Except it was not that simple. There were other forces at work and to Konstantin it was not their adversaries in the West. It was as if something permeated history with a potent spell influencing the thought patterns of every culture. The Nazis had tapped into and used this manifestation. They had tried to pound his country to its knees infected as they were by an ancient madness.

To answer the call for future generations to be safe from such dangerous illusions was to relinquish individual dreams and fanciful indulgences which led to such historical aberrations in the first place. What was needed his leaders ceaselessly drummed into them was an orientation focussing upon reality, nothing more and nothing less. And yet Konstantin was seriously questioning those tenets. They too were as fragile as the insanity which Germany had spawned. The trick was, as he stared at his typewriter, how to convince the powers that be that something far greater was beginning to unfold itself, to flex its muscle so to speak.

The door behind him creaked open as Vera, sleepy eyed stumbled into his small study. Dressed in thick pyjamas she wrapped a slender white arm around his neck and pressed him to her soft warm body, so slender almost wraithlike. He turned and smiled at her huge dark eyes framed by the pale oval face he loved so much.

“Won’t be long,” he assured her though he did not believe it. “I’ve got to get this paper ready.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She said so quietly it was almost a whisper. She chuckled as her hands went down his chest and stomach. Konstantin’s breathing like the rest of him became aroused.

“If I had not been so lazy, if we had not got drunk last night I might have finished this by now.” He complained more to himself than to her. “So now I have to sit here and work. I mean,” he sighed as he caressed her gently, “you’re ruining my concentration.”

“I know.” She said huskily then abruptly disentangled herself. He threw one forlorn look at the blank page and followed her to the bedroom.

Later he was back at his desk staring across the dark deserted road. His mind still blank. The door closed behind him after Vera had blown him a kiss. He got up from his cramped paper strewn desk went into the small kitchen to make two cups of tea. Lighting a cigarette he waited for the water to boil. Then he entered their bedroom where Vera was huddled under a pile of quilts and kissed her warm cheek. She smiled dreamily as he tucked her in. Then returned to his desk.

Smoking another cigarette his mind drifted idly upon his theme. Pushing Vera out of his mind he forced himself to go over his tightly scribbled notes. The kernel of his thesis concerned the past which exerted without a doubt an archaic impression upon the minds of the historically enslaved proletariat. It was sinister. Rifling through his notes he was sure this portent, this virus could easily, if ignored grown into a terrible contagion. A threat for his country and its carefully guarded and guided future. After all he had proof.

He smiled at the contradiction which had just struck him. It would round off his paper nicely for he did believe in something after all: the twentieth century. Its human and scientific achievements, its deliverance from ignorance, from illness and oppression which had liberated the bulk of humanity once the fascist beast had been slain. Having freed mankind from its historic, cultural and traditional shackles great intellects and even greater scientists had flourished busily pursuing even greater ideals.

He lit another cigarette. The great Stanninsky had once said that humanity through its intellectual evolution was uniquely capable of superseding the negative laws of human nature as well as the forces of dissolution and decay which were part and parcel of the universe. That statement was over a decade old and no one as yet had taken up its implicit challenge: except for Soviet socialism.

The real brains were in 'Atom City' surrounded by an overwhelming cloak of secrecy. Semenov knew the place was sealed off even to the majority of the country's elite. It was there dedicated workers like Stanninsky furthered their prodigious advance into history if not posterity.

A convoy of rural lorries rumbled into the sleeping metropolis. The people he would face he knew were not very academically minded. They never looked into the past to grasp its lessons. There lay another of the many paradoxes which seemed to appear as more than just random phenomena. For the past was threatening to flood the present and naturally the future with something he had witnessed. He just hoped they would believe him. What had happened last month still astounded him.

### **Balkh, Afghanistan**

Ahmed Salim made the slightest of hand gestures signalling to Vladimir and Konstantin to remain behind the rocky outcrop. Taking cover behind the jagged terrain, the biting winds blowing ferociously down from the Hindu Kush cutting through them like scimitars. Just beyond the ridge down a barren gully lay an uneven valley hemmed in by the monumental mountains of northern Afghanistan. Snow had begun to fall and visibility was getting worse. They could still see the protruding well worn mound jutting singularly towards the dismal grey sky.

Behind Ahmed swathed as they all were in winter gear was Vladimir Bogden, a KGB operative under whom Konstantin worked. The sky turned leaden. A blizzard threatening but none of them were concerned with the inclement weather.

Vladimir with his powerful field glasses followed the gaze of Ahmed as he pointed to the bareness below. They saw two horses tethered behind some natural outcrops guarded by a solitary figure crouching near the ground. Definitely either Uzbek or a renegade Pathan. Salim's intelligence as good as ever. An operative working for them he had alerted his superiors in AKSA the Afghani secret police that Abdul Maududi had once again slipped across the border from Pakistan. This time he was alone and this time they would get him. The Soviets had been notified. The 'wet department' was assigned to the case. For a semblance of respectability Konstantin had been ordered to accompany the mission. He was officially the archaeological team leader.

"They must have found a way into the mountain." Vladimir said to Ahmed. "With this change in weather his guide won't see us just yet. Only one, must be feeling confident." Konstantin merely nodded and looked to Ahmed for guidance.

In this land actions could not be simply dictated or imposed on the local tribes. The only way any agreement could be reached was by haggling, haggling and more haggling. And bribes. Now Ahmed had brought them to this location dealing with the different tribes smoothened with baksheesh along the way.

Ahmed with his powerful gun slung across his back led the way down the treacherous slope. Approaching the valley deviously which was typical of the Afghan's cunning mind.

The torturous and difficult descent soon warmed them up as the howling wind dropped to a mere icy breeze. Ahmed approached the other guide with circumspection. If their respective tribes were at peace then there would be no problems. Vladimir and Konstantin staid well back as both Ahmed and a Pushtun from Jalalabad and the Uzbek



bade each other welcome in the local manner. Ahmed quickly beckoned the two Russians to follow him.

What looked like a rocky mound jutting up from the ancient valley floor now loomed over them. An imposing pile of boulders thrown against the sky by some violent act of nature. They wound their way into a natural crevice eroded by wintry ice and spring thawed waters. The further they walked on the hard ungiving ground the darker it became. Ebon shadows hovered around them, a stark silence clung to this place. The wind dropped to a breeze sending small clouds of dust into the air despite the light falling snow.

Presently they came to a cavernous entrance. What little light remained turned into a smeary stained grey but Ahmed's eyes seemed to penetrate the gloom without any difficulty. Konstantin cursed as he stumbled against some sharp rocks. The look Ahmed gave him silenced him immediately.

Chastened Konstantin adjusted his clothing then continued deeper into the rocky vault. Ahmed allowed neither of them to speak or move without his consent. They were now in his hands completely. Vladimir for once bore the imposition with fortitude. He had been in Afghanistan before and the ways of the people were familiar to him. Konstantin on the other hand although clumsy at first was learning fast. The best was to adapt to observe and remain silent.

Ahmed stopped abruptly and pointed to the left. The two Russians peered into the murky darkness but saw nothing. Ahmed moved forward, the two men followed. Out of the dismal void they saw an even darker gaping hole which Ahmed approached carefully. He stopped and listened. The silence oppressive. Then they heard the distinct mumbling of voices.

As lithesome as a cat Ahmed ventured into the black gaping hole in the wall beckoning them to follow. He found a stairwell going into the mountain. The darkness absolute yet Ahmed had no difficulty continuing downwards. The stairs were remarkably dry. The circular descent silently accomplished. The air grew warmer and from below the faintest of glows could be perceived.

An eon elapsed or so it seemed until finally they reached level ground. The glow more predominant. Their target was meeting someone beneath this mountain.

They approached the bright nebulous glow as stealthily as possible. Konstantin saw the apprehension on Ahmed's face. Vladimir was alert, gun and silencer ready. His comrade's gaze riveted to the direction of the light. They had found their objective.

They beheld a human adumbration centred within this bright effulgence whilst next to the apparition was the man they had been following. Voices pounding in their minds. Ahmed fell to the ground as if praying to Mecca, babbling uncontrollably. Vladimir shielded his eyes with his hands, struck by the awesome sight into immobility. Konstantin before he decided to turn his back upon the outlandish scene saw the human shadow fade. The light dimmed into twilight then turned black along with the figure within this extrusion. With no sight of their target. Vladimir rushed forward to the very spot then stopped, gaping into what might have been a well. The dark essence retreated below.

Then a sickening crack of a rifle butt on human bone shook Vladimir out of his state of amazement. Eyes adjusting to the natural darkness. Seeing Ahmed crumpled on the ground, knocked unconscious by the guard who must have come in after them. Abdul Maududi as if awakening out of a trance state beheld them, his eyes daggers of anger. Konstantin saw Vladimir move towards Abdul who was pointing a rifle at him. The

volley of fire exploded with devastating effect as Vladimir's head exploded in a pink spray of bones, brains and blood. Konstantin felt removed from the carnage. The robust torso which had been Vladimir wavered then collapsed in front of him like a sack of potatoes. Konstantin in shock stared at the Afghan waiting for what he knew not.

"Tell you friends," Abdul smirked his guttural voice barely containing his glee, "what happens to our enemies." And with that he turned to Ahmed and kicked him viciously in the rib cage as he lay prostrate on the ground. Ahmed merely groaned. Konstantin was surprised at the excellence of Abdul's English. The man his head swathed by wound cloth was a nasty mask of evil. Konstantin continued to stare at him. Mohamed stood motionless.

"And believe this when I tell you that even if you or your infidel friends ever contemplate any acts of aggression against us we will find you wherever you may be and eliminate you long before you can even consider becoming a threat to us."

He walked over to Ahmed, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and heaved him to his feet. Ahmed stood stock still mumbling prayers to Allah.

"Return," he said to Ahmed, "deliver this trespasser safely." Then turning to Konstantin looked him in the eye. Both stood stock still. The depth of the other's eyes were fathomless. Time lay secreted within them, a gulf that spanned millennia.

The two then walked calmly from the dark cavern and were gone. Ahmed could have shot them. Instead Konstantin heard his gibbering prayers. Then stopped. Blinking as if suddenly woken from deep slumber. Konstantin looked around the gloom and heard only their breathing. Ahmed slowly collecting himself, feeling his head, regaining the dignity of his race.

"This is not the will of Allah."

“No.” Konstantin replied. “Who knows whose will it is.”

“The Old Man of the Mountains.” Ahmed said automatically. “Alive after all these centuries. Having found him our lives are now worth nothing.”

“Why?”

“He is the Lord of the Assassins.”

“And you think he will come after us, murder us?” confused at being alive.

“If he thinks you or I are a threat, yes. But come let us return to Peshawar.”

They clambered out of the subterranean chamber. A relic Konstantin suspected predated the Moghuls. The crumbling vaulted cave hewed into this mountain by a race of whom nothing was known. Konstantin doubted he was the Man. Irrespective of the threat that now hung over them Konstantin knew he would return. Something here defied natural law.

A grey evening sky awaited them as they exited the pile of stones. Their horses a little skittish as if they too had felt the uncanny invocation.

The few days it took to return to Pakistan were spent in silence. They rode with a minimal of discourse, deeply affected by what seemed more like a deluded vision. Konstantin had had a glimpse of an age in which faith could move mountains. As for Ahmed, a man of few words relapsed into silence carrying no doubt the impression of this weird occurrence deep in his soul. His devotions at the proper times were fervent as if he was trying to ward off the threat hanging over him.

Konstantin thought with their arrival at Gilgit that the looming oppression possessing them would lift. But it was not so. The bustling market place sounded distant, muffled, not quite there. The people meandered about them like wafting images.

Superimposed collages in three dimensional form. Automations animated by life but not living.

Returning the horses to their rightful owners, Ahmed and Konstantin bade each other farewell. He had no wish to return to Peshawar with Konstantin.

“In a way we are brothers now.” Ahmed a little emotional.

“I’ll be back, rest assured. For Vladimir.”

Silence.

“Look after yourself.” They both shook hands. A disturbance flashed through Ahmed’s eyes.

“May God be with you.” He replied with such solemnness that Konstantin was touched by the man’s sincerity. His voice betraying the fear embedded in his soul. Yet in the bright sunshine of the noisy town Konstantin too felt troubled. Something had buried itself deep within him. Try as he would he could not shake the feeling of being possessed. But by what?

Ahmed shuffled off leaving Konstantin waiting for the daily bus to take him to Peshawar. With several hours to spare he took himself to a small tea house. He bought the Pakistani English newspaper and was assailed by the fervent message of messianic Mohammedism. It railed against the iniquities of the infidel, the poisoners from the West threatening all devout Muslims. It raged against Zionism and the Americans for supporting ‘religious fascism’ something he could agree with. But it did not stop there. Prominent writers, politicians, business men, entertainers and even movie producers all came into sight of the righteous wrath of its editors and journalists. The paper demanded the liberation of eastern Kashmir through a holy jihad. The danger, he feared had arrived.

The bus ride south was cramped, uncomfortable and dangerous. The driver rarely used his gears to descend the winding passes through the mountains. Konstantin saw several wrecks rusting in ravines whose occupants would have had no chance of surviving. Around midnight they reached Peshawar and Konstantin decided to rough it in a three star hotel. The next day saw him on a flight to Delhi via Amritsar.

Alighting from the Indian Airlines Boeing 737 Konstantin thought of his dead companion. They had arrived fresh on a flight from Frankfurt to meet their contact Ali Darum. From what Konstantin remembered he had behaved like an obsequious little shit. Darum worried him.

A minor trade secretary from the embassy met him at the car park of the airport. Along with a bodyguard they drove off in an overbearing black Zhil limousine. Passing rickshaws, carts, people. Here they were Konstantin smiled the heroes of the oppressed proletariat driving to the most exclusive suburb of New Delhi. Lush green trees, wide avenues, clean sparkling Bedfords, some pedestrians on equally spacious footpaths. An oasis amongst the rambling tenements of the rest of the conurban maze.

They drove in silence. The trade secretary a man in his early forties content to say nothing. Their driver and bodyguard a masked blank.

In front of the huge iron gates of the Soviet compound, languid Indian policemen allowed them instant entry. Once inside the cool four storey building Konstantin at last relaxed. Maybe it was the crowds everywhere, exhausting just to watch. The trade secretary in his ill fitting suit beckoned him to the elevator. Escorting him to the second floor and into an anonymous office. A secure room. A desk, several chairs with two camp beds. No window. No air-conditioning just overhead fans on low.

Finally the secretary smiled. Konstantin assigned top priority. The secretary sitting behind the empty desk, pressing a button. "Tea, whisky or vodka comrade?"

"Whisky for a change. Once back home I'll have vodka coming out my ears."

The trade secretary, a cover, pulled out a drawer and lifted the receiver putting in Konstantin's request. From inside his jacket he retrieved a packet of Marlboros offering one to Konstantin. Looking for an ashtray which he found in another drawer.

"Back amongst friends."

"Yes."

A knock and an older woman came with a fresh bottle of 'White Heather', barely glancing at them and left. Once more from the drawer to glasses appeared. The secretary pouring the glasses nearly half full, shoving one Konstantin's way.

"To Russia."

"To Russia.' Though not downing the lot.

Another knock and their driver reappeared. Another glass was poured.

"Allow me to introduce comrade Viktor Dubrov."

Viktor flashed him a large smile. Not just the trade secretary but the driver a head lynch pin. Very Russian. Probably a colonel.

"What a mess." Viktor said, pulling his chair closer. "We received your update from the consulate in Peshawar. So what happened to Vladimir?"

"He got shot. His head blown away."

"By whom?"

"One of the Afghanis I think."

"You are not sure?"

"He looked like one. It was dark. We weren't introduced."

“Why not you?”

“Getting the same send off?”

A nod from Viktor.

“A warning I should think.”

“Please don’t think. Answer factually.”

“It’s an expressed comrade, nothing more.”

“Well just the same keep it simple.”

Konstantin nodded, enjoying the drink. Viktor refilled his glass. The trade secretary sitting there his face impassive.

“This Maududi you were following, what happened?”

“Vladimir’s source said he knew something. A strategic location in Balkh.”

“Strategic. In what way?”

“That it was unique. A meeting place.”

“Why unique?”

“That is not so easy.”

“Make it so.”

“After what I have seen. It is a vortex that defies the laws of physics.”

“Hm. Anything else?” Konstantin surprised at Viktor’s equanimity.

“You asked me to keep it simple comrade.” Smiling, finishing his glass. Viktor replenished.

“Go on.”

Konstantin ran his hand through his thinning hair. “It is well and truly amazing. I am beginning to wonder if this had been some illusion. The site appears, sorry, is a



cavern within a cavern. No evidence of recent human activity except following the target there. And were ambushed. But before that there was this glow, rather strange...”

“Strange? In what way?”

“Not natural. No power source.”

“Implying?”

“The light came out of what could be a well. Within this thick beam of light a shadow that could have been human. Upon our being discovered, it went into a dark effusion and collapsed into the well. During this Vladimir got shot by the target.”

“Why do you think Ahmed was spared?”

“That is easy. In Afghanistan tribes have shifting alliances. Mostly at each other’s throats, sometimes not. Ahmed was lucky. It is their code. Once protection is arranged that protection is not prematurely withdrawn because that triggers tribal conflicts. Ahmed was protected. As for myself the assassin said I was allowed to live to warn my people that they will brook no interference.”

“Was that a bombastic threat do you think?”

“Ahmed did not think so.”

“I am asking you.”

“From what little I know of Afghanistan I cannot be sure. But I would consider it not to be an idle threat.”

“How was that threat formulated? A general form of retribution, a jihad or you personally?”

“It sounded all of the above comrade.”

Viktor and the silent secretary exchanged looks.

“Do you think it includes our sovereignty, this threat I mean?”

Konstantin grimaced. “Tricky. Ahmed was convinced we had stumbled across the Old Man in the Mountains.”

“Meaning?”

“The ancient order of assassins.”

“Indeed?”

“I cannot say for certain comrade. The myth has been going for centuries, ever since the Christian Crusades. It might well be a handy cover for whatsoever is going on there. But of one thing I am certain. They have tapped into something that could have monumental effects.”

“Upon whom?”

“Not whom but what.”

“What, then?”

“The future.”

“Explain.”

“In twenty seconds comrade?” Konstantin smiled. Viktor ignored that one.

“If this vortex is real then we had better get at the bottom of this before they fully exploit it.”

“Who do you think they are? The target that escaped?”

“As a historian I have no idea, yet.”

“The Soviet Union is on a mission comrade Konstantin.”

“My hypothesis then. If this energy translates into human, no make that psychological possibilities then we are dealing with an ancient resurrection.”

“An ancient resurrection.” Viktor repeated more to himself than anybody in the room. “Superstition.” He continued helping himself to a cigarette. Lighting it. “Are illusions we are told. False consciousness distorting dialectical reality.”

“That’s it comrade.”

“What?” Viktor surprised.

“False consciousness distorting reality. Delete the concept ‘false’ and replace it with ‘different’ no even better, make it ‘alien’.”

“So an alien consciousness manifesting itself up there in Balkh, centred upon that particular cavern.”

“Yes. I am certain.”

“You are?” Viktor’s eyes bored into Konstantin’s.

“It defies the known laws of physics.”

“Of which we are ignorant?!”

“Yes. Err, up to now that is.”

“Shit. You think there is a plan?”

“Certainly.”

“And?”

“And what comrade?”

“For fuck’s sake, out with it.” Draining his glass.

“Viktor comrade. Please.” The trade secretary breaking his silence. “Konstantin is telling us what he can. Maybe your line of questioning is askew. I do not think this Maududi would confine his plans to Konstantin who is after all a ‘ferenghi’. It is a pity the mission failed and the loss of our fallen comrade in arms in the great struggle we are undertaking. Dead men don’t talk but survivors do. The message is clear. We are being

warned off and intimidated at the same time. Alien or not. However Konstantin informs us that whatever the events were they involve at least for now a potential threat. We have to ascertain whether this is also a threat to our great motherland. In other words, is this a national security issue?"

**Moscow**

The black Zhil arrived promptly at nine thirty in the morning. Konstantin was ready as he went down with the driver who had come to fetch him. That he was being picked up not by the dreaded militia should set a few tongues wagging. They skirted Moscow University its gargantuan neo gothic skyscraper as dominant as the country and just as proud. His heart lifted then fell as they continued onwards. He realised this was going to be clandestine which deflated him somewhat. His work, his speech, his analysis would be buried, maybe in perpetuity in some vault of whatever service department had take an interest.

Under a grey blanketing sky they sped into the woods on the outskirts of Moscow. Konstantin tried to engage the driver in conversation but received for his effort mere grunts. Watching him in the rear vision mirror he came to the conclusion that his escort was probably suffering from a monumental hangover. The bleary red eyes said it all.

“Had a few vodkas comrade?”

“Urgh. Last night’s a blur. I’m glad I’m a driver and not a labourer. I’d be dead by now, from work.” He laughed.

“The real heroes hey what?”

“Yeah, real heroes.” And relapsed into his comatose state. They turned off the highway and onto a narrow sealed road surrounded by a forest of dense pines. Konstantin rolled down the window enjoying the scent of the woods. The cold air refreshing.

“Who am I meeting?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

“You do this often?”

“What?”

“Drive people like me to clandestine destinations?”

“All the time comrade all the time.” Then resumed his isolation. Konstantin did not mind. Mornings were not his favourite time either.

They turned off the sealed road and headed up a narrow track. The road was rutted belying its importance as they approached an iron gate whose guards at their post snapped to attention. The place was ringed by a high barbed wire fence. Identity papers were checked and one of the elite KGB guards telephoned the next post. The gate swung open electronically and they proceeded at a statuary thirty k. The pines giving way to scattered birches. A second perimeter fence. Once again the KGB guards scrutinised their identities, telephoned their progress and let them through.

A Swiss chalet, their destination was built on a hill top. Guards patrolling the grounds. The Zhil drove up a gravelled path and lurched to a halt. One of the guards opened the door for Konstantin.

“Brief case comrade.” The guard asked politely. Konstantin gave him the key. The guard opened it, rummaged through his papers, saluted then handed it back.

“No bombs I’m afraid.”

The guard relieved the driver, got into the Zhil and drove behind the chalet where the service area was located. The silence, apart from the humming wind and occasional call of a cuckoo was relaxing. This was bliss as Konstantin stretched his legs. Another guard escorted him to the front door and spoke into the intercom. A buzzer sounded and the door opened silently.

A young buxom maid curtsied and motioned for guard and guest to follow. They passed down the hallway up a wooden staircase. The place looked deserted. Upstairs they passed several closed doors until at the end of the corridor she opened a large oaken door.

Facing Konstantin, the guard returning was a spacious living room appointed with modern Scandinavian furniture. The room was bright, wall to ceiling windows giving a splendid view over the immense forest. In the centre sat half a dozen men, all in civilian suits. He recognised none of them. The maid saluted and left. They turned as if he were interrupting a cabal. One of them, heavy set and in an ill fitting suit that threatened to burst at the seams rose to greet him.

“Konstantin Semenov. Good of you to come. Please take a seat.”

“Thank you comrade...”

“Drink?”

Konstantin saw on the table plates of cold meats, salad, potato salad, several bottles of Finish vodka and French brandy. A percolator of aromatic coffee bubbled near the wall.

“Thank you.” He surveyed the gathered who had their eyes on him. Four of them his age, maybe early seventies. Two were relatively young between forty and fifty. With briefcase in hand he took the remaining seat a comfortable reclining chair. The maid whom he had not seen poured him a large vodka, brought him black coffee and departed. Konstantin watched her ample figure as she left. The heavy set man smiled knowingly at Konstantin.

“She is also a karate expert comrade.” He laughed. “And now to business. Forgive me if there are no introductions but I can assure you that we here are from various departments interested in what had recently occurred in Afghanistan. The more so due to the murder of our fallen comrade Vladimir Bogden.”

“Yes. A most unfortunate turn. A waste really. They should have both let us go really. His murder was pointless.”

“An act of stupid bravado. But then again Afghanistan is not on the same level as the Soviet Union. Make yourself at ease, drink.” His host said amiably.

“To the future.” Konstantin proposed as a toast and the others followed suit. By the look on their faces this was not their first slug. The rancid smell of cheap cigarettes hung in the air. A packet of Bensen and Hedges lay in front of him,

“Help yourself. It is a token of our appreciation of the good work you are doing.”

Konstantin lit one enjoying its smoothness and taste. His host pushed one of the bottles towards him. He poured another one.

“We have been reading one of your wife’s novels.” His host said, throwing Konstantin off balance. “She has captured the collective imagination with her homely heroes pursuing the great goal of the scientific revolution of the socialist state with an excellent approach. But unlike the enemies she defeats, we, I gather from what Delhi has informed us, are confronted with an enemy altogether different wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. Different. Most definitely.”

“Why now?”

Konstantin shrugged indicating anytime was as good as any. He then repeated what his debriefers had gathered from him in New Delhi. They mused over the implications of the ancient order of assassins, the return of superstitions imams firing up the unruly clans, whom it threatened, possibly the precarious political regime in Afghanistan. Which was propped up by Moscow. Perhaps even those gathered here. The country on their border tottering at the edge of disaster due to the innumerable tribal fights and various factions including the local socialists were ceaselessly engaged in.

Finished Konstantin caught himself looking into the silent forest outside. In thought. The wanted a summation.



“We are at the edge of an important breakthrough brought about courtesy of our Afghan neighbours. If we can tap into this source, if we can run with it then gentlemen the Soviet Socialist Republics will be an invincible power.” He paused for effect then glared at them, “If we pursue with audacity this discovery of ours.”

He was of course referring to psychotronic warfare.

“It will not be easy. But we are the leaders in this field. Though what that phenomena was in that cavern is important to the enemy. It is a source of power that is certain. One we should use, explore and maybe even discover within our borders.”

“Interesting. Go on please.”

Konstantin finished his coffee.

“The universe,” He paused to see if they were ready, their looks passive yet alert, “has knowledge in abundance. With our raised alert consciousness in just a few centuries we have transformed civilisation and us. From molecules to galaxies. From superstition to enlightenment. From conversion of energy to the H bomb. It is we, as homo superior who are on the brink of the next level of evolutionary dialectics.”

In his element.

“This stupendous harnessing of energy has generated progress. It as evolved us as well. Especially socialism with its dialectical laws of transformation to mould the future to our design. We have nullified the inescapable law of social entropy. Religion. No longer will its rank decay drag us into the mud of the Middle Ages.”

“How does this relate to Afghanistan?” one of the younger man broached.

“Comrade you have hit the nail on the head. Let’s keep hammering!” Konstantin beamed. The vodka and coffee had done wonders. His brain sparking.

“As in what?” The man with the birthmark on his forehead asked.

“Those who would turn the clock back are reversing the dialectic. Drawing on the negative, the decay, the entropy of any given system to infect themselves and the rest of the us. Iran is but an example. Or Saudi Arabia. Or Pakistan. Now this negative trend does not come out of nowhere. There are certain locales on this planet which exert a potent influence, like Mecca, or Varanasi, on the weaker of the species. In the ancient world it was the temples harnessing innate powers. Except we will progress whilst others flounder in their dark mysticism. However as the enemy wishes to draw its pernicious cloak over us so is it our duty to negated their tendencies to corrupt our minds. We have the means to become like...gods.”

“There are many challenges correct?” Another face asked.

“If we harness these locales to manifest our will then nothing can stop us fulfilling the socialist vision.”

“And Afghanistan?” His host suggested.

“They want to resurrect an ancient psychic phenomena, weld it to their soul, infuse their religion and drag us into their orbit.”

A studied silence. Not hostile, relaxed. Konstantin refilled his glass.

“So these locales could be termed entropic?” His host suggested.

“Either by design in that that energy is neutral but used for negative trends or it might be negative overall. It is too early to tell.”

“So it appears.”

“And there are others then?” the other of the younger men questioned.

“There could be many. For instance, the native Americans. Whilst accepting the bounty of technology their minds remain steadfast in the past. New Guinea, Africa...”

“So your plan?”

“Get control of these centres where they do exist.”

“Such as the one to our south.”

“Yes. A good place to start.”

“And what is your opinion regarding Afghanistan?”

“It’s a mess.”

They laughed at that.

“Please comrade Konstantin.” His host gently chided.

“It’s the truth. The plan. The ancient pagan sites of Europe were coerced into the Christian church by the simple expedient of placing their churches on pagan sites.”

“To be sure. But how is it that we, of the Enlightenment are supreme whilst the third world wallows in poverty and misery?”

“They are misusing these innate effusions of power negatively. It comes back to religion. It is no small wonder that the Asian societies, less religious in the narrow sense are making headway whilst Africa is stuck in a vicious cycle which no amount of foreign aid can break.”

“So the next, ahm, resurgence will be Asia?”

“Certainly. India I must add is confusing. There is deep spirituality and yet they are slowly advancing into the twentieth century. But there will always be exceptions to the rule. So to get back to Afghanistan. There is most certainly a centre of power in Balkh.”

“And where is our source of power comrade?”

“Science. Science is fearless. It negates, usurps or cajoles the occult. Science clarifies it does not obscure. To see things as they are not as we wish them to be. It strips us of our delusions, banishes our psychosis, liberates us from the bondage of nature.”

“So we have nothing to fear?”

“I wish it were that straight forward. In a perfect world, yes. We must be vigilant. Like Iran society can self reverse. Think of Andalusia under the then Muslims and the catastrophe when the Christian faith became dominant there. It could happen to us. It could well be that we are on the threshold of a new barbarism as exemplified by the rise of a twist to the Muslim belief system. They are on the attack. The mullahs have called our adversary ‘the Great Satan’. I think it says it all. Rest assured they think similarly concerning us. Our southern republics are vulnerable. If Afghanistan falls the repercussions could be horrendous. For the whole world. From Indonesia to Algiers.”

“And Europe?”

“We are the anchor in their east. Their west is mostly secular. Believe it or not in this they are on our side.”

“This goes against the very foundation of the historical dialectic.” One of the older men exclaimed. “Marx and Lenin...”

“Yes yes yes comrade.” The host speaker interrupted. “There is no denying of their validity at the time of writing. Like a hernia religion is supposed to fall away. Unfortunately as our esteemed guest pointed out, negative trends, the counter point is on the ascendant. The proof regarding what occurred at Balkh verifiable. Disturbances in Egypt, fundamental leavening in Saudi Arabia, the mullahs of Iran indicates a swing towards the negative. To be sure, not just our belief in science but the application of the scientific method welded to the historical force of socialism will emerge as the dominant force. But for the moment we will need the lumpen bourgeoisie on side. That will be a matter for others to decide. We are here to give advice where it will matter the most.”

Then turning to Konstantin thanked him for his presence and his analysis.

### **Sassnitz GDR**

The hour it took to fly in the freezing mind numbing MIL helicopter from the garrison town of Zepernick to the Baltic resort town of Sassnitz on the island of Ruegen had been tedious to say the least. Viktor had once more assumed his alias of Dr Fadeyev. They were over the dismal flat swampy terrain of Vorpommern. Endless pastures intermingled with slivers of meandering rivers flowing into innumerable lakes looked picturesque from the air but avoiding the monotony of traversing it on the ground. Some of the worst and desperate battles had been fought here when the victorious Red Army smashed its way to Berlin.

After passing Greifswald, no doubt another dump they veered slightly east to head for Sassnitz a town he was familiar with. As the ferry terminal from Trelleborg the Stassi under their direction caught many would be defectors and traitors trying to escape to Sweden. The fools never learnt who was boss here. But the East Germans were willing stooges almost relishing their task to subdue their own people. Without much humour Viktor could easily comprehend the reason for the rise of old Prussia. Surly they followed orders without question, it was that simple. If only, he sighed, the Russian people had that grim determination but then he reasoned, bored, so much that made their Slavic character so human would be subsumed making life unbearable. At least his people knew how to enjoy themselves, often too much so.

The mists below cleared as they approached the Pomeranian Bay. A sparkling sea under clear blue skies greeted them, lifting Viktor's gloomy thoughts. He knew the GDR well. A run down slum resurrected into an industrial power house which his country milked gladly. And still they had one of the highest standards of living in the eastern bloc.

The cliffs which raised the island out of the Baltic whizzed past. Bright green fields, red roofed villages, feudal remnants vanished as quickly as they appeared. Within minutes Viktor saw the large white Intourist hotel the major draw card of Sassnitz. They landed on a small airstrip at the edge of town. A black Emka was awaiting him.

Stiff legged Viktor extricated himself from the MIL cockpit. The motor blades whipped the fresh sea air into his smoke filled lungs. Seagulls whirled overhead, some hovering in the breeze. In the distance the soft roar of the Baltic subdued at the moment but just as easily whipped into anger. The young naval lieutenant from the small base at Kiek jumped out of the Emka and opened the rear door for him. Viktor decided to ride in

the front. These cars had no heating and he preferred some warmth from the motor. They drove along the near deserted road into Sassnitz passing the odd smoke belching tractor carrying feedstock and produce into town.

Sassnitz was old Germany stuck somewhere at the turn of the century. Grey two to three storeyed buildings huddled amongst the medieval streets soon gave way to the promenade along the seafront. Overlooking the town was the Swedish built luxury hotel an edifice in gleaming white.

He dismissed the driver knowing where to contact him if need be and checked into his room which overlooked the calm blue sea. A perfect day. He picked up the phone and asked for a room number. The line buzzed with Viktor suspecting it was monitored. He spoke to Katarina for several minutes then arranged for a rendezvous at the bar downstairs.

It was early afternoon and the spacious lounge was barely filled with Swedish and East German business men. Some perhaps from the other side. Local tourists there were none partially for two reasons. The expense of the place for starters as the hotel's main aim was to attract as much hard currency as possible. The second reason was more covert. The Swedes might have built the establishment but the Russians had integrated some sophisticated electronics in special rooms for outside visitors. It was still cheaper to spend money on espionage for industrial purposes than spend mega millions on research and development.

In the spacious bright lounge, its wall to ceiling windows overlooking the sea Viktor ordered a Bock and told the waiter to bring an Armagnac for his visitor when she arrived. The waiter bowed and left him at his window table at the far corner of the plush lounge. The tables near him empty. He had a good view of the comings and goings here.

Countess Katarina von Ostern walked regally into the lounge. Some of the business men gave her a passing glance then resumed their own intimate conversations. She was dressed in a trim black business suit, her hair tied back in a bun. A silver brocade was on her lapel. Her signal everything was fine. Her face severe, pale, her eyes pitch black gleamed with delight as Viktor rose and kissed her extended hand.

“Countess you never seem to age.” He beamed as he pulled back a chair, waiting for her to be seated. He motioned to the waiter to bring the liqueur then sat himself. He took out of his etui offering her a cigarette from his private collection of Turkish tobacco which she accepted. Rummaging in her handbag she extracted her cigarette holder, inserted the cigarette delicately as if handling something precious and rare. He lit her and she inhaled savouring the unique blend, with a hint of the Balkan in its make up.

“At my age one never does.” She replied. “My god this land is dreary. The roads are ancient, leftovers from the Reich, the blandness tedious. Why you people hang on to this is beyond me. But we have not come to discuss the demerits of this...” waving her long thin hand in a roundabout way as if to say words failed her.

The waiter appeared with the Armagnac which he solicitously placed in front of her. Viktor ordered another Bock. She smiled her appreciation sniffing the rich herbal aroma.

“So Dr Fadeyev,” suppressing a smile, “we are doing it again.”

“Pulling the wool over their eyes. I sometimes worry. It seems to be too easy.”

“They are amateurs. Dedicated in their field of research but babes in the wood when it comes to the serious implications of my work.”

“Do they ever suspect?”



“Kurt thinks he does. He does not trust you Russians. As to Rosenberg his religion makes him suspicious of everybody. It’s funny you know.”

“What is?”

“He thinks I’m a Jewish émigré.”

“Does he now?”

“Apostate. It is enough to convince him.”

“Well never mind. We too keep an eye on him.”

“So to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Our last meeting on the other side.”

“What of it?”

“Don’t you think it was a little premature to let the cat out of the bag? I mean revealing so much. Not just the research or its implications. But entering our equation into it?”

“The Russian connection through you? Remember you demurred when it was raised. In fact you welcomed it to check out the people involved. And don’t forget my dear Viktor your candidness worked its charm. Subterfuge would not, nor silence. My people might be naïve but they are not stupid.”

“Of course Katarina. I do not forget these things. But to business.”

“Good.” Another sip.

“After you.”

“Not much progress as yet in Nepal.”

“And Australia?”

“Irrelevant for the moment.”

“Pity.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s so far away from everything. What happened there was so convenient.”

“But unexpected.” “

“It too took me by surprise.”

“But it would not have worked.”

“Why is that?”

“The limits placed on Soviet personnel there. Tit for tat. They might not be at the centre of anything that matter to us but since you restrict their people in travelling in your country it would have just been too difficult for any of you to roam at free will down there.”

“As usual countess you are correct. Yes what you say is true. And from what we know down there had this unusual event occurred within our limitations then maybe yes. But even if we had managed to break out being in the countryside might have attracted undue attention. Country people are good at smelling a rat.” Drinking his Bock.

She raised her glass. “Indeed.”

“What of Rosenberg’s plans?”

“The thread we are following will eventually lead to we hope Afghanistan. What he discovers there is up to you Viktor.”

“That is very gracious of you.” Said in good humour. Katarina merely smiled.

“My superiors in Moscow have a plan.”

“They always do. A contingency for just about everything imaginable. Is that not so?”

“We have an academician. One Konstantin Semenov.” And Viktor reached into his inner coat pocket and took out a small photograph which he pushed across the table.

“Hm. Distinguished.”

“He is married to a successful novelist. But she is of no concern to us. A good citizen and a good socialist.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I take it she is not in on this.”

“No definitely not.”

“So much the better. Anyway getting back to Rosenberg and the team.”

“How much is known?” finishing his Bock.

“Let us say Max has his own research establishment. Under cover. He will not be a problem. Neither ought the post grad student Martin. Rosenberg’s the target for obvious reasons.”

“And what are they countess?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“If you don’t mind.”

The waiter came over. Katarina said she was fine, Viktor ordered another.

“Oh I will have another.” She called out. A few heads turned for a moment. She looked at him. “What?”

He was shaking his head a little.

“Viktor if we act as if there is something going on then it will look exactly like something is going on. Capiche?”

“Of course.” He relented. While they waited for the drink to be warmed in the large bulbous glass they talked of more pleasant things. Life on the seaside, the vacant materialism of West Berlin despite its glitz and pseudo glamour. The left wingers and Moscow’s supported neo Nazis which both thought hilarious. Then another of Viktor’s excellent Balkan-Turkish blend.

The waiter arrived with their drinks and left.

“Now Viktor. This Afghan mission.”

“Yes.”

“Vladimir Bogden.”

“On indefinite leave I hear.”

“Viktor.”

“Angola.”

“Angola my foot. This is Cuban and East German territory.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on them.” He dissembled.

“Alright then have it your way. So what can you tell me?”

“How would you like to go on a little holiday?”

Katarina merely raised her pencilled eyebrows.

“I cannot leave.” Thinking of her operational centre over the wall. Her eyes and ears. “My vanishing would attract attention. I want to concentrate on Rosenberg.”

“I do not trust him.”

“You think he has another agenda? He’s got two already. The academic side and his peculiar ideas. Is that not enough?”

“Never.”

“An agenda within an agenda.” Swirling the glass.

“Most likely.”

“Meaning?” letting it settle.

“He will use anybody to achieve whatever it is he wants to achieve.”

“You suspect he is after this power source for aims other than our own.”

“Most certainly.”

“And you have proof?”

“Nothing that would stand up in court as they say.”

“A hunch.”

“Countess. Really. Think of his background.”

“Mossad?” taking a sip.

“One never knows with these people. We have our `refuseniks’.”

“That is your politburo. Personally I have no reason to doubt his integrity.” Since he was doing her bidding.

“Things have changed.” Taking in some more Bock. “A new ball game as the Americans are fond of saying.”

“A good point. The Americans. Very quiet. Surely they must have caught wind of this.” Being deliberately vague.

Viktor just smiled. “Not while Carter is president. If Nixon had been around, then yes. Kissinger is not the eminent grise he once was. Brezinski has his plate full. Afghanistan is not on their agenda. Katarina I have a proposition for you. Semenov is scheduled to go into Afghanistan on a cultural exchange programme. Why don’t you meet him?”

“But Viktor. If I am seen with a Russian, appearing out of the blue...”

“He would be delighted. Semenov is as pure as the driven snow. No party affiliation for starters. How he managed to get to where he is in the academy of sciences is beyond me. I know he has no subterranean connections. And a lot of respect. We will foot the bill naturally.”

“And what am I to do? Take snap shots?”

“But of course. What else does a disinterested tourist do?”

“This Semenov is there officially did you not say that yourself? And if I make contact where does that leave me?” It was not a question.

“You will meet him by chance, at the airport. What could be more innocent?”

“And does Semenov agree to this?”

“He will.”

“I must admire the way you people get things done.”

“You are not so innocent yourself countess.” Raising his glass to hers. She graciously returned the gesture.

“And what is it we talk about? The weather?”

“Psychotronic warfare.”

“The mysterious but disbanded department eight.”

“Yes.”

“You know our Rosenberg thinks there is a conspiracy coming from your scientist, fiddling with perception.”

“All we are doing is some basic experiments. Nothing more.”

“Bending spoons, separating egg yolks.”

“You suppose correctly. It is a beginning. With no ideological blinkers.”

“I am not going anywhere Viktor. Understood?”

“Ah Katarina...”

“I sometimes think, wonder if you are in love with me.”

“I am. You are a rarity indeed.”

“Why thank you.” Her dark eyes sparkling. “But you won’t change my mind.”

Viktor gave up. She did have a point. Even this meeting was not without its dangers. He wanted to know more about Semenov’s stance. Had he an agenda other than

what he had revealed at the meeting just a few days ago. The countess could have been invaluable there. Bring up Afghanistan in a disinterested but interested way. Their culture, their beliefs. Their fractious tribal chiefs. One in particular who had escaped.

“And I cannot allow anything on my part alerting Rosenberg. That is non negotiable. I do not want to know what the underlying aim is either. Remember this group I have forged is not some discussion group. You ought to remember that Viktor. What we are doing is deadly serious. Neither of us want our cover blown. I am doing what I can to keep the Americans disinterested. We don’t want them getting curious. Whoever thought that up had not thought it through Viktor.” All business.

“Of course countess.” Trying to look chastised. “I just thought you might want to check out the terrain.” It was weak.

“You think Rosenberg might be hiding something from me. Perhaps. Goes with the territory. But revealing myself is not the way forwards.;

“Semenov might have a point.”

“And I am your lead in?” dismissing the thought.

“Semenov has indicated a certain strange occurrence occurred over there.”

“You’re being obscure.”

“A manifestation.”

“Of?”

“That’s just it.”

“You have Semenov. Use him. As you said yourself...”

“It could strengthen the Muslims there.”

“Then I would be the last person you want there. For starters I am a woman and in these cultures women have their place. One which I will not accept, ever.”

“You are correct. I guess we have to use other means to see what Semenov really has in mind, what the tribes intend. They could become the dominant force.”

“So your politburo fears that their representatives in Kabul are threatened.”

“It is the nature of the threat that concerns me and you.”

“That is why I have Rosenberg’s team in the area Viktor.”

“It might be for the best this way.”

“I know it is. Don’t look so glum Viktor. We both are making progress.”

“I am just hoping the Afghanis in the mountains don’t. What they are playing with is the proverbial fire. One that could burn us all.”

“Then I am the best you have.” She smiled sweetly.

“I admit it was worth a try.”

“You have your priorities and I have mine. Remember we are working together. But you must understand going into the field just is not done. We use our proxies as always.”

“How is your drink?”

“One more, please.”



## Moscow

Konstantin woke up with a hammering hangover. Too numbed to figure if he should be at work then recalled it was Friday, his day off. He recalled the dinner party at Joseph Panov's opulent flat on the other side of the city. Half the department there including his old professor who had rambled on about everything and nothing as they all had.

Then it came back to him, slowly. Panov wanted to see him today to meet a colonel in the KGB. Not said directly. Laying amongst the tangled sheets he saw Vera had already risen. He listened for her presence but the flat was empty. Sunny outside squinting through the curtains after finally rising. His head felt like a throbbing brick. The hum of the city louder than usual. Ten thirty and a knock on the door. Which did nothing to clear his foggy mind. Grabbing a bathrobe to wear over his pyjamas he answered the door knowing who it would be.

"Ah Konstantin. You look how I feel. You haven't forgotten now have you?" he asked playfully easing his way in past Konstantin who just stood there barely registering his presence. Joseph was Ukrainian which made him suspect in some people's eyes. But he knew personalities, apparatchiks, fixed things, dealt in information which probably made him and hundreds more KGB. He had arranged this meeting after all.

"Come in." Konstantin mumbled with Joseph already in the kitchen. "I think Vera is giving some talk at a high school today. Cup of tea?" as he ambled back into the flat nearly forgetting to close the door.

"No just get ready. Car's waiting downstairs."

“Cars can wait. I’ll have a quick shower and a shave.”

“Do so and don’t dally.” Joseph trying to sound professional. “Androponov runs a tight ship. Efficiency he calls it and it gives us all the shits.”

“Aha.” Konstantin replied from the bathroom. Not feeling the best. “Now I know who you’re working for.” The water running over his head.

“Me?” Joseph replied surprised. Pretending to anyway.

“Yes you.” Then with some reluctance went through his ablutions.

Done. The traffic was light. Off to the KGB’s ochre coloured rococo building facing Felix Edumdovich Dzerzhinsky Square. The car entering the grimy umber edifice not from the main street but through an adjoining building on the Kutu Zovsky Prospect reserved for non KGB personnel.

Having received their visitors cards they were escorted down brightly lit but poorly ventilated corridors redolent with stale air and cheap cigarettes. Their cards were checked every twenty metres by frigid faced guards. As last they entered a well appointed and ornately decorated office. Right on the dot of eleven thirty. Semenov and Panov faced two military men one of whom had been present at yesterday’s dinner party. Probably sounding him out. He could barely remember the man.

Colonel Dubrov head of the First Chief Directorate of Foreign Operations had brought in his comrade of the Seventh Directorate. Colonel Bakst. The latter responsible by way of introduction for overall and general surveillance. Dubrov squat brimming with good Slavic nature smiled at his two visitors. Bakst lean as a greyhound ushered them to two leather chairs.

Though refreshed Konstantin wondered if they really were interested in his ideas or whether they were displeased with some wrong footed ideological cock up. Panov

resumed his neutral expression something he did when he felt out of water, out of his element. Konstantin was never impressed by anything except brains. With a nod from Dubrov Bakst poured four generous glasses of Swedish vodka handing them out. They drank to the mother country Semenov feeling instantly better. Revived. The toast over Dubrov sat down behind a monstrous oak desk facing Konstantin whilst Bakst leaning nonchalantly against the washed out regulation green wall. Dubrov did not waste words or time. He asked Konstantin what his method of attack was all about.

He recapped what he had said during his debriefing at Delhi and the chalet. Outlined the psychic contents being resurrected in Balkh.

“It proves comrade colonel of a definite connection between the functions of the mind which is then able to manipulate the environmental field of its operation. I believe remote targeting is one of many applications.” Eyeing the bottle. Dubrov looked at Bakst who did the honours. Vodka like this one did not come across everyday unless one had hard currency or vouchers. Konstantin gratefully accepted his glass and lit a cigarette. Dubrov watching silently. Impassive. Alert.

“I think with the right guidance we can influence the future in ways both profound and unthinkable in the past. Supercharge the dialectical process. We are on the edge of a quantum leap. If we control this energy rationally, scientifically then the future is ours. That is certain. No one will be able to stop us.” And downed the glass.

“How do you propose to go about using this energy source?” Dubrov leading on.

“By using the right psychological type of person. Inserting them in this field of force. We could produce any type we like. A Lenin, a Stalin or another Marx. The potential is only limited by our imagination in using it. We could have an army of soldiers trained in psychotronic warfare.”

“And such a location is in Balkh? And would there be other such locales?”

“Most certainly.”

“You have scientifically verifiable data concerning the feasibility of this?”

“In my reports, so, yes.”

“Thank you comrade Semenov. I can make no decision at the moment. I will have to speak to higher placed people. Again thank you for your cooperation. You are free to leave. And Semenov. Not a word of this, even to your wife”.

”Of course.”

Outside the office he barely contained his joy to Joseph. “The power of the mind to conquer space has begun and we are at its spearhead. Ah it is good to be in this country. Space in the mental sense and space as in location. To release the mind’s near infinite potential Joseph, think of it. I am in cerebral ecstasy.”

“Nice.” Joseph a little glum.

A week later another meeting with Dubrov. They would get in touch with him. He should be ready when the call came.

He bounded up the flight of stairs finding the flat silent, empty. Vera out somewhere. Puzzled he looked around thinking maybe she was queuing, Russia’s euphemism for shopping. He had withdrawn a week’s wage from his savings account and booked a table at one of their old haunts. The restaurant was romantic, the food tolerable and the champagne not overpriced. Good Russian stuff too. A surprise for her.

Rummaging through their ageing wall cupboard a gift from his now deceased parents he found a note next to the spare bottle of vodka. She reminded him she was giving another speech at local high school number seventeen on the creative literary

works and its place in the formation of Soviet culture. He would have to phone quickly before the teachers decided to get drunk with her after her seminar.

Spending a good half hour phoning around the various unhelpful departments he finally managed to deliver a message to the right person. He lied saying he had had a minor accident and could his wife phone him the moment she had finished her lecture.

“Is it serious?” the woman at the other end enquired. Nosey.

“Of course it’s serious! The doctor has come and gone and I am currently chair bound.” That should get some results.

He then poured three glasses of double vodkas. That way he could keep a check on how much he was consuming as he waited. He switched on the valve radio. One station had funereal music, another light orchestral another political speeches all too predictable and boring. He put on his precious jazz records. The few he actually managed to acquire after standing in endless lines that never moved then resulting in the counter assistant saying they had run out of stock.

He thought of Vera’s work. Her novels sold well enough, more than his books. He was known but she was popular. Knowledge versus entertainment. They both thought it was funny. The black humour Vera interwove into her characters heightened her effects touching a popular nerve of the reading public. Sometimes he expected her to be hauled in front of the authorities for her anti social views. But she always saved herself by allowing her deviants to get their just deserts and like a good Catholic bishop, got away with murder.

He heard her dump her briefcase onto the sofa and hurry towards him, expecting an invalid. Her soft white face, her smouldering eyes and lilac lips, her wispy black hair and slender figure always revived and still fascinated him. Even though she was pushing

sixty. She faced him with anxious searching eyes seeing he was slouched in an armchair with three empty glasses and a half empty bottle of vodka. His eyes staring happily into space listening to Benjamin Goodman.

“I heard, they told me, are you, what happened Konstantin?”

He rose a little unsteadily and gave her a wet sloppy kiss on her cool cheeks

“I am quite fine thank you. Have a drink and we will celebrate. I’ve booked a table at our favourite little restaurant.”

“Then you are alright.” She relaxed and smiled. So sweet.

“Yes. I feel brilliant. I have been sent on a working holiday.”

She stared at him.

“A holiday?”

“A working holiday. Yes come, have a drink.” Lining up the three glasses, pouring vodka into them without stopping. Some of it splashed liberally onto the table.

“Your reports, they’ll spoil.”

“Stuff the reports. A toast. To my minor success.” And they downed their glasses.

While Vera changed into something less formal Konstantin quickly washed his face to refresh himself. Then both ready they walked the odd kilometre to their cosy little restaurant.

Over their potato and sausage soup and their second bottle of champagne he showed her the official letter from Vladimir Below, head of the Seventh Directorate allowing him to go to Afghanistan via India and Pakistan. It was to be a preliminary survey for an archaeological research mission.

“Afghanistan. I don’t believe it. But you have just been there.” Is all Vera said several times over. The entrees finished he ordered another bottle during the wait for the

main course. Konstantin blew her a kiss and explained it had all begun several weeks ago when he had been interviewed by a colonel of the KGB. He laughed as her face froze.

The stuffed cabbage rolls arrived.

### **New Delhi**

Konstantin arrived with a scientific exchange program at Delhi the worse for wear. Last night's revelry had been another binge session with colonel Dubrov, Panov and several other prominent people he could not remember. Having cleared customs he was met by an embassy car and whisked off to the prestigious Ashoka Hotel set amongst the tranquil circuit of other embassies and consulates. Delhi looked regal. His driver escorted him to a room on the second floor and knocked. A harsh voice commanded them to enter.

“I see it’s you comrade Semenov.” A stout Klara Alanaya, an operative said. She introduced Rina Losovksy, probably both assumed names, golden haired, pale, looking frail with a black belt in karate and judo. They both had short hair. Klara brawny and loud was a colonel in the GRU he supposed. Rina was looking out of the window over the lush parkland and terraced outdoor café with practiced indifference.

“Come.” Is all Klara said as she explained the plan. A contact was to bring their facilitator to the open air café. Konstantin saw the omni-directional microphones pointed below. The tape recorders on hold. Klara and Rina the technicians monitoring Konstantin’s conversation with one Jamin, an Afghan.

“What do we need people like that for?” he asked by way of conversation.

“He is a Muslim. Afghanistan is stirring. The ancient feudalistic government is failing. The age of American imperialism is over and we are here to help. But we need to know more. People like him are our ears and eyes on the ground.”

“But there must be other sources, surely.” Konstantin thinking of what had occurred in Balkh.

“People like Jamin know the pulse on the street, in the mosques and the bazaars. This part of the world is in ferment. Iran is going to the dogs. Bhutto’s regime is finished. The Muslim world is awakening and we need to know where the storm will break next. There is Kashmir, Afghanistan, Turkey, countries with which we share borders. I tell you the next decade will see many changes and we must be one step ahead of them.” Klara explained.

“I agree. No doubt you have studied political science?” he asked.

“Yes. And you?”

“Contemporary history and parapsychology.”



“Fascinating? Parapsychology I mean.”

“Yes and rewarding. Sometimes I think people are mad.”

“I have come to that conclusion many times.” She said lightly “I read some of your papers. But I ask myself this: should I believe you?”

Konstantin shrugged his shoulders. “That is the uncanny thing about the human mind. What it thinks actually becomes real over time, no matter how outlandish such thoughts may be.”

“Our target has arrived.” Rina said moving back a bit.

Below they saw a tall robed man moving gracefully between the white tables. Behind a broad built operative from their embassy. Rina switched on the tape recorders aiming the microphones and adjusting the settings. Get the VU range right.

“Ready when you are. Good luck comrade.” Klara wished him well. Rina focussed.

### **Sumtek Monastery, Nepal**

For the past few nights Abbot Vajpasana had been dreaming intermittently. He had not dreamt for years. It was most unusual revealing he feared the disturbance of his inner serenity. He thought of the novice he had allowed to enter the mandala. Vanished just like the renegade rinpoche. That worried him. What to do? Sending another volunteer would be sheer folly at this moment. If only he knew what was occurring on the other side, if there was another side. He felt like going into the mandala himself but the dream, the revelation was disturbing.

It had been raining now for three days. The road was temporarily washed out. Thick volumous clouds poured in off the mountains ringing the monastery. The rain was lashed by a fierce wind, the coming of autumn sooner than expected. Most of the work around the temple had ceased. Some building repairs were being undertaken but all in all it was an imposed time for reflection.

He welcomed the rain. Too much bright sunshine distracted the younger monks who felt the energy of nature diverting. They became frivolous, reverting to a playful

state innocent enough in itself but a hindrance to the path they had chosen to follow. Now ironically it was the imposed quietitude of the rain which troubled him. The dream another life, a former self arisen of its own volition. And he wondered, sitting in his cosy little cell, whether, as the Panchen Lama had indicated that all this was just part of the unravelling of the universal matrix they so ominously feared.

It was still pre dawn. The wind howling, tearing at the wooden shutters, circumnavigating the walls, trying to gain ingress. The rain relentlessly assailing the building. Normally he felt comforted by the inclement weather but the last few days his mind had been in as much turmoil as the unleashed elements outside.

The first dream nonsensical. Receding upon awakening and the only memorable thing about it was that it had happened. The people in it were not remarkable for anything in particular except for the fact that they seemed confused yet acted as if that was natural for them to be so. He put it down to his own disquiet.

The second dream was slightly different. He had been living with a woman of all things. She was more of a presence than a physical reality and he comforted himself in that she had not resurrected any carnal desires. That reassured him for he was not regressing in any way. They were living by the seashore in a distant but familiar land. Strange ships, fascinating in their weird transmutations sailed from beyond the horizon towards their house. It was funny for he had wanted to photograph them knowing even in his sleep that they were most unusual. The sun set with sudden abruptness revealing a dazzling bright canopy of stars. Then it got weird. For amongst the stars, in their ocean of infinite blackness resided sentient beings, within space itself.

For a moment the howling wind abated, the rain incessant. He would have to lead the morning prayers soon. Others would already have risen to prepare the hall for the

other monks. Yet the last visionary experience, for it felt more than just a dream was persistent in its uniqueness. The usual discrepant turmoil of unconnected images had at first fascinated him but then as if bored the image shifted skywards. There again the glittering stars, reassuring in their eternal presence. That was to last only momentarily.

He rose off his mediating pallet and pulled the woollen blanket around his orange robe. A dim greyness was beginning to pour through the slats of the shutters. A furtive morning indeed. Then for some reason his mind allowed the dream to recur. The twinkling silver stars seemed to have come towards him or he towards them. He did not think he had left earth and had no intention to check for fear of destroying the projection so potent in its approach. For the further he was amongst the stars the less there were until he was confronted by utter black space, totally infinite. At first he reasoned in his dream that this was the void, the centre of the mandala. Yet there was no reason to think the mandala had anything to do with it. This was cosmic. Then in that darkness another darkness pushed this darkness towards him. Having reached the rim of the physical universe itself. In his dream anticipation rose. The wall of darkness was pushing or drawing upon him, it did not matter. The second darkness awareness, knowing what it was doing! The reason for its relentlessness, guided, forced into this universe. Even that made sense in the dream. He was certain there was a second universe and it was not blind force but calculating itself onto this one. Then he had woken to the howling wind and the lashing rain. Since awakening he could not remember how long he had lain there, then arisen changing his robes and sitting in his lotus position to reflect upon the cosmic strangeness of it all.

Buddhism though concerned itself with the condition of the human mind first and foremost and for good reason. If the mind was not balanced then neither was reality. He

had no wish to burden the Panchen Lama with his visionary revelation but felt that it was somehow connected with the events they had spoken of in Kashmir.

After morning prayers he would make arrangements to travel to Kathmandu if the road was fixed. See his old friend Abbot Vajra Padma and see what he would make of it. Knowing the man he probably would smile at this and let it pass. He decided to go into the great hall and lead the monks in morning meditation.

## **Kathmandu**

“The line is secure sir.” The cipher clerk said seeing the encrypting machine was ready. Rosenberg lifted the receiver in the secure communications room of the Israeli embassy and dialled a number. Outside the first lashing of monsoonal rains ensilenced here with only the hum of the air conditioning in the background.

After some hissing and squeaks the line cleared. “Code black.”

At the other end a tinny voice running through safe circuitry acknowledged his presence.

“One. Balkh. Possible centre of activity.” Without elucidating exactly what. That it was potentially hostile was assumed at the other end.

“Two. Recent arrival from Uzbekistan of tribal leaders. Practitioners of Sufi shamanism. Secretive. Possible links to the Assassins. Threat alert yellow. Object political and religious. Potential to destabilise status quo.”

“Three. Probable contact with Soviets whether KGB or GRU. Aware of Soviet’s operation designated ‘Black Magic’. Unknowns as yet if by default or design.”

“Four. Common thread the ‘Akashic Records’. Cover for a mental code to subjugate the collective unconscious by remote conditioning.”

“Five. This record alludes to a coming race. Its origins central Asia. Possible connection with these Uzbekies.”

“Six. Using Islam as a cover they could be connected with the Ismailis, the Muslim Brotherhood or other Shi’ites. Iran only the beginning.

“Confirmed.” The tinny voice alluding to the message.

“My co-worker has discovered an ancient black tablet at Swayambhu. Total mystery. Outside pattern. End message.”

“Confirmed. Out.” And replaced the receiver. The cipher machine reconfigured its settings. The clerk turned the visitors’ book and Rosenberg signed himself out. The cipher clerk dialled a number, waited, said “Secured transmission complete.” Waited, listened then told Rosenberg the assistant director of military intelligence was ready to receive him.

Down the corridor and through a double set of doors for his meeting.

“Johann good to see you.” Joshua rose from his desk shaking hands.

“You still sound like a Yank.”

“That’s `cause I’ve been spending so much time with out unpredictable cousins.”

The dapper man in his mid forties, eyes smiling replied easily.

“How goes it?”

“Carter is too nice a president. Have a seat. Coffee?”

Rosenberg shook his head.

“Good. I’m almost hyper.” He laughed. “He won’t last. Begin had a hard time with him. Seems that he and Nasser got along too well. But the agreement was reached, signed and sealed so all’s well for the moment.”

“For the moment, yes.”

“What gives?” A statement. Joshua concentrating, the hard bitten marine behind a facade of the gentleman spook. Eyes of grey steel in a determined face. Even the short cropped grey hair seemed to bristle.

“Operation Black mean anything?”

Joshua dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “And?”

“Meaning?”

“C’mon cut the crap.” Fixed smile.

“I assume we’re isolated, insulated.”

“I doubt we’re being targeted by the Chinese or the Indians at this moment. The Soviets are too smart to be of concern here.”

“Well our Soviet friends are ramping up their psychotropic program. Outside their territory. One of their operatives was killed recently in Afghanistan. Balkh to be precise. They are not going to let it go at that. They’ll be back.”

“Which brings in the cousins.”

“Leave them out. They’ll blow it. Ever since Nixon corrupted the CIA we have to stay clear of them. Extending to the White House. I’m going to work from within.” Johann remarked obliquely.

“Plenty of willing individuals.” Joshua relaxed knowing how their co religionists would cooperate if need be. “So this ‘Black Magic’?”

“Been running for around twenty years. Nothing major yet. But if they team up with these Uzbekies then I worry for the future. Not just our future Joshua.”

“So. Balkh it is.”

“With the countess following the ‘Black Magic’ pattern at her end.”

“I’d better update your next arena then.”



Rosenberg relaxed in the armchair facing Joshua. Outside the rain had ceased.

“Worse case scenario civil war.”

“Good.”

“Karmal took over with his Parcham faction from Taraki. Pure Afghan rivalry. The KGB, not the Politburo pushed them into a shot gun wedding. Literally. Another coup and with Daoud Khan dead Karmal was pushed out as ambassador to Prague. Possible Soviet contact for their ends. Taraki is not so secure. Now the armed forces are more Khalq which means the Parcham faction will have to make a stand. Except being intellectual Marxists it ain’t gonna work. This isn’t eastern Europe. Karmal is tainted red. Add Hafizullah Amin, a Pushtun to the mix of the Ghilzai tribe meaning politically the People’s Democratic Party and the keg is set to go off. Taraki and Amin go back to Frankfurt West Germany. The predictable anti-imperialist crap. And Karmal’s got another enemy. Driving out Daoud in seventy three who just happened to be his uncle when he was out of the country. It’s all unwinding fast and when it blows it will be an opportunity for us, for you Johann to do whatever it is that you do.”

“You mean you don’t know?” Not believing it.

“Stirring a lost cause? No. Black Magic the backdrop.” Without the need for confirmation. “Your team ready?”

“Ready to go. One last visit to Swayambhu. Praj is near a solution. I’m not expecting much. The placing itself is wrong. At best of historical interest. All I do know is that it all points to anything but a tablet. Seals, cylinders, and yes tablets but what they got here is truly a blank. I think it’s votive really.”

“How long?”

“A few days.”

“You think it wise using amateurs?”

“Professional amateurs. The best. Not too cluey regarding our end.”

“And so far?”

“Nothing.”

“You know shit can happen.”

“Goes with the territory.”

“So what is known? What do they know that we don’t.”

“Occult murders in Australia. That’s the post grad. Max’s contacts. Surface stuff. Scientific verification mostly. The psychological end. Praj is the historian. And the countess shadowing the Soviets. We’re sweet.”

“Good.” Though Joshua would have preferred his people in place. But Rosenberg delivered. “If the enemy succeeds what then? Contingencies.”

“Send in the marines. Hit them hard.”

“That the big picture?” wondering how that would solve the problem.

“Containment is the priority. Only if that fails Josh.”

He winced at the abbreviation. “If it gets out of control you’re gonna be shut down.”

“Great.” Not happy. “That’s when we will really be needed. You know the countess has a Soviet contact.”

“I’m listening. We are aware of her émigré contacts.”

“Does a Viktor Fadeyev mean anything?”

Joshua merely shrugged.

“On loan to the Humboldt University. With minder. No name, barely a face.”

“Infiltrated?”

“Perhaps. If the Russians get in first then there will be problems.”

“I’ll see what I can do Johann.”

“Please.” Aware that here in this reclusive part of the world they could follow events without the heavy surveillance in place. Too easily recognised and harder to be compromised. For the moment the operation was holding. But the infiltrators from Uzbekistan was of concern. Not the attention he wished for. It was time to make a move.

“We are dealing here with something that take us into an age of mythology. This could be the language of Babel prior the great dispersion.” Praj Tamralipti said solemnly. He was ecstatic just for the idea in itself. Rosenberg wondered how this had anything to do with his mission. To stop this occult resurrection.

They were gathered in the dining room of their rented mansion. So the mysterious tablet at Swayambhu’s library was indeed a find of monumental dimensions. Whether it related remained to be seen. Even if irrelevant it would be a bonus in that if anyone was interested in their work Rosenberg would conceal their real intentions. Max was drinking beer as was Martin. They had finished another delicious meal cooked by Mahindra. Outside it was pouring.

Praj in his stride as Rosenberg sucked on his pipe. A pale blue nimbus over him.

“The first books were of power, of magic, of being in communication with gods residing on Earth.”

Rosenberg became attentive.

“They vanished with the cataclysm. Vanished, not vanquished. If this language is in code it could be a way for them to return.”

Rosenberg hid his excitement. This might just dovetail with what he knew. What he kept to himself.

“Not so much an age of the miraculous. We know so much more. But these beings were capable of displaying powers which we are slowly realising ourselves.”

“Are you saying Praj,” Johann waving his pipe around, “that this language can what? Bring the gods back?”

“You mean an invocation?”

Johann merely nodded.

“That is the usual pattern.”

“But if these beings, these so called gods are so powerful, then what is stopping them from doing whatever they want to?”

A sheepish smile from Praj. “They might be no more. Or lost interest in us. Or maybe we performed in ways conducive to their own orientation. Maybe they will return if we stray.”

“We have always done that.” Max said putting his beer down. “I can see these beings as itinerant travellers at best. Our consequence insignificant. But if they do return they might envisage a future not conducive to our health. I don’t trust gods.”

Martin interested how that would go down. Max was Max.

“I think it’s our perception that has changed.” Praj answered happily. “This tablet I believe comes from an age so long ago that memory falls on unsure ground since even our sublime minds are unsure in the correct bearing. Like the red shift of the expanding and receding universe. From the red shift to wavelengths which decay into sub atomic states, fractured, fragmented. We piece together the remnants such as this object. Now the light of some stars may no longer be there and so it is with its authors. There is

another conundrum. This object comes from an eon when forces unknown to us functioned in germinal ways we can only guess at in an abstract and elemental sense.”

“Praj. The laws of physics don’t change.” Max being realistic.

“I was referring to those of the mind.” Praj smiled, ever the gentleman. When Max remained mute he continued. “It could well be that using physics,” a quick look in Max’s direction, “that some miscreant gods actually engineered the catastrophe.”

Max broke the silence by opening another can of beer. He lit a cigarette and said: “If this tablet is so worthy or important then why was it lost? Surely an object of such pertinence would be revered if only for its own sake. Unless these beings were in a hurry.” Max trailed off worried where this was leading him. Some sudden overwhelming force which threatened beings far in advance of what they were capable of today.

“Unless that was the point.” Martin added. “It might have been intended to be lost so that whatever it contains remained out of sight.”

“I have an even worse scenario.” Max blowing out smoke. “The human race took on the gods and naturally lost that one. Maybe we or this object resurrected our dark side so much so we nearly lost it totally. So the wiser of survivors made sure it got lost.”

“Why not just destroy it Max?” Martin asked in all innocence.

“Good one. If it can be destroyed than it’s gotta be terrestrial. If not, then its alien.” Max happy with that. Another swig of beer.

“What worries me,” Johann having listened, “is if there are other artefacts such as this. Hindu and Buddhist literature alludes to mandalas being secreted, along with books not just over the planet but hidden in time as well.”

“Can that be so?” Praj surprised at the supposition.

“Quantum superimposition.” Max replied relaxed. They turned to him. “It’s like an electron. It’s in a state, a shell. All over the place but in no particular place at any given moment. Only by measuring it’s state does it fall out of it’s shell and into a position. Like a photon. Both wave, dispersed, non-localised and localised when read correctly. Meaning the right technology folks.”

“Yes.” Praj was enthusiastic, his tea getting cold. “If the right mind with the right resonance comes along it will reveal these hidden mandalas and books. Of course.” He chided himself for not seeing that sooner.

“What if they are, ahm time bombs?” Martin wondered, more from the effect of the beer than any serious thought given to the conversation. Johann nearly freaked. Exactly what he had almost considered. What had niggled him at the back of his mind. What had worried him without real clarification. Indeed. What if? Because whoever, seeing the Soviet’s ‘Black Magic’ in a new light, managed to not just secure but decipher and manipulate these, this object then they just might have some sort of cosmic bomb in their grasp. That made his mission even more pertinent. Temples had always been centres of power. Maybe this tablet had lost its temple. If the two were conjoined it might open up quantum states of superimposition just waiting to be activated. He decided for the moment to keep that to himself. Unfortunately Praj was onto it.

“What if a diabolical mind, a Stalin or Hitler or some ayatollah gets a hold of this. For you see the Chinese speak of the vaults of heaven. An apt metaphor for if a vault is indeed opened, by quantum physics then it could well be that we have the beginning of another Yuga.”

“You mean it could realign our minds automatically?” Max thought for them. “I mean people I’ve got enough trouble handling this reality as it is. I don’t think I can cope

with another one just yet.” And finished his beer, then stubbed his cigarette into the empty.

Martin woke with a thick head. The conversation between Johann and Praj getting too esoteric for Max and too erudite for Martin. Max had invited Martin to his room where they smoked a few numbers. Martin’s brain relaxed. The whole notion of malignant intelligences lurking just beyond the veil of reality more an enticing challenge, if real at all, or a convolution of hyper minds who were entangled with forces which long ago appeared real but had no relevant impact now. Sleep when he tumbled into bed came easily for Martin. For a while he thought about it all, the seals, the tablets until it made less and less sense.

The next day the clouds had cleared, the sun shining as a sparkling new day awaited him. Last night’s gloom laden prognosis a flight of disturbed fancy. The minds of the ancients in no way relating to his. He had a quick lukewarm shower and refreshed went downstairs to see if he could get a pot of tea from Mahindra. The metallic cacophony from next door’s workshop adding to the ambience.

Mahindra was in the kitchen smoking a beady. She rose as they exchanged pleasantries. Tea was no problem. Max joined him ordered as well and they ambled into the warm courtyard.

Max pulled out another two joints lit both handing one to Martin. Since it took a while for the water to boil by the time they had finished their morning ‘sparkler’ as Max put it the tea arrived. A rooster crowed somewhere, trucks rumbled past, bicycle bells jingled outside and in the distance the dull roar of an approaching jet. Mahindra arrived with the pot and two cups of tea. Milky sweet. Tasty. Neither wanted breakfast after last

night's big meal. Feeling relaxed Martin had no wish to remind Max their conversation.

Instead he asked: "Where are they?"

"Swayambhu. Two thousand years ago some pilgrims saw a beam of light on the hill and decided to build one of the best temples ever."

Martin, mentally relaxed merely nodded. The tea scolding hot.

Having finished their tea they set off to the temple library where Praj and Johann were busy chasing shadows. For some reason being slightly stoned put a different spin on the whole venture. Martin momentarily convinced that no enigmatic beings were lurking behind the veil of reality. Nothing was stopping them, if they even existed from remanifesting. It sounded too outlandish to be taken seriously.

They ambled down the narrow street. The earth fresh, the trees glistening, the medieval houses washed from last night's rain.

"So Martin. Rosenberg."

"Yeah?"

"Well? Any ideas?"

They walked past a huge white colonial building next to a monastery, through an open air bazaar and into another narrow lane crowded in by Kathmandu's distinct architecture. A group of street urchins laughing around them asking for money. Max handed them a pile of copper coins. Tourists about gawking. Some noisy, others as relaxed as they were.

"No idea Max. He's dedicated."

"Yes. I wonder if it's an obsession."

"Would it matter?"

A noisy beeping Toyota edged its way through the milling pedestrians.



“Well yes Martin. I’m the headcase here.” Max smirked, amused about himself. A butcher slaughtered a pig which collapsed under its cumbersome weight. Within moments his workmate ripped open its belly as shiny light brown intestines plopped out and quickly removed.

“That’ll keep the flies off us.” Max joked. “No I mean this thing about the return of ancient gods. The restraining of powers with terminal intentions threatening for a better phrase our way of life.”

“Like some sort of resurrection?” Having reached the river, a mere trickle where washerwomen were busy with whacking the laundry over rocks. A suspension bridge for pedestrians spanned the minor depression.. Swaying slightly from the locals crossing it. At first Martin had trouble with his footing, hanging onto Max to steady himself. Below a man was squatting, relieving himself.

“Yes.” Max replied at last as they were on solid ground again. “I mean he’s paying for our trip, but the man is a bit of a mystery.”

“Really? He’s in the open.”

“Best place to hide sometimes.” Walking along a wider road, the medieval houses set further back. Rich coloured Tibetan carpets on display along with intricately ornate silver jewellery. In front the hill upon which was built the temple, shining in white. On top a golden peaked stupa draped with colourful rows of tiny triangular flags. Beneath that a huge singular eye.

“I guess it’s up there. Johann’s given me nothing to do you know.”

“Me neither. I guess when they find what they want we start scribbling.” Max answered. “Now Praj thinks he can crack the ancient symbols. Hinting that one must adjust one’s mind to it so that it all becomes clearer. Unique.”

“Is that what he said yesterday?”

“Sure did.”

“Must have missed that one.”

They started the long climb up a staircase. Around them a pleasant park hiding a lot of noisy monkeys chattering away.

“Take the climb slowly. It gets steeper higher up. Anyway Praj thinks the symbols on the tablet are resonances so that if the mind self attunes, voila, the code’s cracked.”

“What if it’s nasty?” breathing slightly from the exertion.

“Don’t even think that. Like some sort of spell like Tutankhamen?”

“Yeah? Why not?”

“Indeed.” Without elucidating. The climb did get steeper until after some time they along with many locals were on top of the hill. Below the jumble of the city.

“Quite a view.” As people moved along.

“The real estate up here must be with a few bob.” Max looking around him. There was a whole village of houses up here. “Yes. Atoms have certain energy states as does the mind. That is Praj’s theory anyway. If it fails at least he’s getting some meditation done.

To Martin the majesty of the temple was impressive. Flanked by a few dozen houses the stupa dominated the hilltop. From its centre the short tower with its mute penetrating radiating painted eye penetrating some outer object in the beyond. No matter at what angle the eye on each of its four sides was viewed it looked at you and past you and through you. The nose doubling as a question mark. Simple, effective, brilliant.

To their right a large open hall where orange robed monks milled about, some chanting burning incense or praying in silence. Whilst full with pilgrims and tourists.

“Have a look around. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve found Praj or Rosenberg.” Max disappearing into one of the buildings near the white stupa.

Martin entered the large hall where tourists guffawed and pointed away at the obvious. Religious paintings along with green demons, blue devils, red monsters threatening the calm meditating bodhisattvas. The ornamentation rich, rewarding, intriguing. The art dynamic without the sickliness of perpetual suffering. The antics of the denizens of hell mere disturbances, aberrations that were as transient as reality itself. Christianity had no chance. Along the borders of some depictions left and right oriented swastikas. Everywhere.

He walked to the rear of the hall and found himself amongst countless small stupas of varying sizes set amongst brass prayer wheels etched with messages of good will. Twirling them sent these missives to heaven by their mere rotation. Everywhere small statues of Buddha in his many stages of his varied life.

Beyond Kathmandu. A patchwork of browns and greens, the mountains crisp lilac. Martin had a sense of eternity as he looked at the eyes looking into the four cardinal points of the world and perhaps something else entirely. Whether ancient demonic forces or indifferent cosmic intelligences would be nice to know. The buzz of the joint wearing off.

He saw Max with a grey clad bald monk approach.

“Allow me to introduce Yehensho, an invaluable help in our researches here. I think he’s got the whole library in his head.” Max being flippant and serious.

The monk of indeterminate age smiled, clasped his hands together then bowed slightly. Martin returned the gesture more clumsily remarking on the artisans who had created Swayambhu. Yehensho nodded, turned and followed him into a building across

from the hall, down a staircase and straight into a library carved out of the bedrock of the hill. The walls hung with colourful mandalas. Along the walls cupboards and shelves packed with scrolls, parchments, small wooden block books, loose prints and thousands of manuscripts. A few desks in the middle under neon lights where sat Praj and Johann both pouring over olden yellowed manuscripts.

They sat at a vacant table. Praj looked up, smiled, Johann nodded. Then they resumed their note taking.

“Many of these works date a long way back, well over a thousand years when Europe was barely a concept.” Yehensho’s voice drifting gently. “Many are still in Tibet. Not all are Buddhist but they all deal with the arts of man and gods.”

“Gods?” Martin asked superfluously.

“An expression of the higher mind.” Martin looked puzzled. Yehensho continued: “Gods come from the mind and given the right attitude can form into independent entities. Then they are truly separate. The Egyptians and Babylonians were also aware of this.”

“Like the ‘Book of the Dead’?” Martin trying to sound half intelligent. Max was relaxed as always.

“There were even stranger manifestations on this planet once.”

“Alien mandalas?” Martin curious regarding what Yehensho had just said.

“Some dangerous to the enquiring mind.”

“Even though you allow us to glimpse these...artefacts?”

“Why not?” Yehensho replied evenly. “Do not misunderstand. The blind cannot see. As such it is of no consequence what might be revealed. Tea?”

“No thank you.” Max answered for them. Yehensho nodded.

“Do you think this, ahm object is some invocation?” remembering some of last night’s conversation.

“Could be. Maybe. If your friends can trace its historic origins then some light may shine upon it, however slim.” Yehensho bypassing Martin’s question.

“But surely something as unique as this must have been studied.”

“Those that have are no longer with us.” Came the equivocal reply. “Something in darkness cannot remain so forever. Anything unaffected by change must and will degenerate. Who knows how long this object has gestated upon its own energy. Mutating becoming a hybrid.” Leaving it at that. Martin was worried looking at Max. He seemed imperturbable.

“Could I...?” Martin looking at Yehensho then Praj and Johann.

“Ignorance can be of benefit. Your mind knows nothing so it cannot be clouded by outer influences. If you can maintain this state who knows what comes of it?”

“I see.” Though Martin really did not. Now he was all at sea. The moment had arrived. Was he ready? He doubted it. But then when would he be ready?

“This urge to understand, of attaining its knowledge and its attendant reality and I say reality not truth may open avenues in your mind that might be uncomfortable..”

Yehensho said carefully. “What if any effect it may have upon you may have consequences different to your expectations.”

“Honestly. I don’t have any.” That much was true. When Yehensho remained silent Martin continued: “Terra incognita.”

“If things go strange concentrate on your breath. It will pass.”

“Thank you Yehensho. Dr Rosenberg. May I?”

Johann looked up. “Most certainly.”

“Thank you.”

“May Ganesh guide you.” Praj said.

Martin rose as did Yehensho who opened a door behind a tapestry, another mandala with some very strange scenes upon it. Convoluted, writhing, recumbent energy.

“The Enlightened One in Hell.” Though the demon’s grimaces looked more like the antics of children than the horrors of Christendom. The room was empty. Yehensho opened another door. The walls glistened a little as Yehensho lit a hurricane lamp. On a small pedestal was a dark slab with glittering hieroglyphics.

“Please do not touch. Turn out the lamp when you have finished.”

“Thank you Yehensho.” But he was already gone.

Martin pulled the chair a little closer. From the lamp above the light reflected upon the runes in a sparkling array. The lamp flickered a little. Small shadows slipped across the ebony surface. The ciphers glowing of their own accord. Almost moving when not looked at directly. Martin got up and walked around the rectangular slab. On its edges were indentations, inserts of small squares and rectangles.

It looked unreal. More like a copy of the original. The workmanship not that precise. He felt like laughing. The simplicity of the idea, the thought, humorous. It couldn’t be surely. He surveyed the tablet if that’s what indeed it was. The only time he had seen glyphs such as this was on an acid trip. But was it writing at all? Alien it was if only in conception not orientation. Never mind what had been discussed last night or even prior that. If there was a hidden message it died with its progenitors.

Focus Martin. Fact. It is a tablet. But the more he studied it the more he was certain of its shaky pedigree. The angles of the patterns looked like a circuit board. He shook his head at the simplicity of it all. The lines imitating conductors. The fine lines so

abstract, almost artistic. This object was a copy. Which of course led to the question of where was the original? And what had been written about this one? Most likely steeped in its own mythology. Someone had tried to imitate whatever the original had accomplished. Which was what? Back to the ancient Akkadian cylinder seals, or Babylonian tablets? If this was indeed a copy of a circuit board or its outer shell then perhaps what was within was the computer itself. Currently their computers were the size of wardrobes. But a future civilisation would be more advanced. They were in the wrong location. However the library might have clues as to its origins. Then if Praj and or Johann discovered that they could be on their way. Martin was excited.

For the moment he would not tell even Max. It would be interesting to see what the others would come up with! Looking for what? The original. Did they know this was a duplicate? At best reveal what they were on about. The basics he knew. It was enough.

He opened the door, shut down the light wondering about Abysmus. Was there a connection? So far historically tenuous at best. The ancient seals certainly not this. The indentation at the edges indicated it be inserted into a mother component. A master drive. The trick to find that and see what gives.

He took his time walking back through the empty room. So who and why was Rosenberg interested in this? Make contact with whoever had left this behind? If so why? If only he knew of a computer expert. Or an alienologist. Did these people exist? Was Rosenberg and Praj exactly that? He was glad Max had via Rosenberg no doubt asked him along.

“Ah master Ferguson. Back so soon?” Praj asked in his correct English. The library looked brighter. Rosenberg merely acknowledged Martin. Interesting.

“Well what is your opinion?” Praj continued.

“It’s got me beat. Alien squiggles alright. I’m no philologist. Sort of Babylonian cuneiform but no Rosetta stone. Quite a task Dr Tamralipti.”

“Indeed it is a challenge. If we crack this it will be monumental.” Praj exuded happiness.

“You would become very famous.” Max nowhere in sight.

“Our team would be that indeed.” A dark look from Rosenberg. Not that Praj noticed. “Anyway back to the grindstone as the English would say.”

A small monk entered the library with Yehensho. Praj about to return to sit at his desk remained standing. Rosenberg looked up and stood as well.

“Abbot, we are honoured.” Praj said deferentially.

“Please, be seated. How is the work progressing? Is everything to your satisfaction?” His face exuded a becalming radiance. A delightful levity in his modulation.

“It is a most trying task.” Praj answered for all of them. “As you are no doubt aware holiness this tablet and its history is truly an enigma. Your assistant Yehensho has named this ‘The Well of Eternity’ as it appears so unfathomable, dark and endless.”

“It appears to be beyond the realm of human knowledge from what you have told me. Is that still the case?”

“It is holiness.”

“Beyond our understanding certainly.” Rosenberg ventured. Martin was loving this.

The abbot nodded non committally.



Rosenberg said: “I have the distinct feeling this tablet is a cornerstone of a vast system of still hidden information which reaches beyond our limited intellectual paradigms. Its ciphers are from an alien mode of thought.”

The abbot listened placidly, his face soothingly radiant. Almost indifferent Martin thought. Was the abbot aware that the artefact was less than it appeared? Enjoying this cosmic joke? Martin suppressed a smile. This was delicious.

“I just wonder abbot.” Rosenberg began. “Whether this should remain hidden. Some knowledge is indeed dangerous to the human race. I wonder if we are ready for its revelation. I am prepared to make an offer. With your permission of course.”

“Is that so?” the abbot smiled. “What are your plans?”

“None.” He lied.

“So why bother?”

“My organisation can keep this safe.”

“Keep the secret for itself or secure from others.” The abbot’s eyes sharp, alert. Yehensho immutable.

“There are the Russians, the Chinese. Private collectors whose agents travel the world...”

“Such as yourselves.” Light of tone.

“...who might not have our benevolent intentions.”

“We are all aware of this Dr Rosenberg.” The abbot replied unperturbed. His demeanour had returned, calm serenity. “Let us assume for the moment someone might wish to possess it. The people of Nepal know of its existence. It is not an object of art. It has no religious significance. If anyone, apart from yourselves has an interest it would be CERN. I understand they study exotic molecules.”

“Err...” Rosenberg flummoxed.

“They have the capabilities which could analyse its component structure with the aid of high particle X-rays, leaving the object totally in tact. And I can assume your research institute is of a more esoteric and less of a scientific orientation?”

“Both abbot.”

“You wish to possess it. You are not the first nor will you be the last. I do not think this object which is of such interest to you will leave this sacred temple. You are welcome to pursue your research here as are others.”

A monk approached reverently and bowed to the abbot. “You have a visitor.”

“Oh?”

“He said he wrote to you last week from Sumtek.”

The abbot’s face turned into a radiant smile.

“Vajpasana?”

“Yes.”

“Then let us not keep him waiting. If you will excuse me Doctors Tamralipti, Rosenberg, master Ferguson.”

“Of course abbot. Thank you for your time.” Rosenberg trying not to sound deflated. The abbot turned and with Yehensho in tow along with the monk left them to their own devices.

“Good try.” Praj commiserated. “But the abbot is right. This is the best place for it. The contents of this library alone...” he gestured generally.

“Someone brought it here for a reason.”

“Removed from its original location.” Praj admitted.

“To find its source. Its primary location.” Rosenberg mused.

“But does it connect with the seals Abysmus mentions?” Martin asked.

“A mythological and astronomical map perhaps showing us or even better still revealing the location of their ancient gods.” Praj contended.

“Exactly Praj. I don’t know about you but my research is going around in circles.”

“I have come to that conclusion myself.”

“Kathmandu has shown us, well this library has, where I think our next goal is.” Rosenberg stretching. They waited. “Afghanistan.”

“But where and why there?”

“The north. Most of their ancient monuments are there. Civilisations have crossed there often. Even the ancient Turanians made camp there. And they did have alien gods. I don’t want to go back to either Iran or Iraq. Anyway those sources are exhausted. The information might have originally come from there but that does not indicate as such that so is the location. Their ‘city of books’ is pre-deluvian. As are other source places. Ancient Bactria, from what I have gathered, that is modern Balkh is full of whispered folk tales, misty mythologies hinting at strange and often seriously unhinged gods. Not that I intend to resurrect them. But we now know that this artefact is a gateway. As an artefact that is thousands of years old I do not think it would still be in working order. So I propose we head west. If there is a receptacle for this object at all then we shall see if we cannot come to some agreement...”

“Like a loan.” Praj interrupted.

“Precisely.”

“Will you still need me?” Martin asked meekly. So far he had done nothing.

“We may need your extra pair of hands. As well as Max. Of course we may need you. Even if you merely carry our rucksacks.”

“Will we need to divert in India?” Praj asked almost surreptitiously.

“Our contact there? We’ll see. We can discuss this later.”

“Agreed.” Praj delighted. “I was beginning to tire of sitting here day in and out. We’ve been here a month now.”

“Something like that. And I guess young Martin here can start collating the notes, summarizing our notes. Or get them in some sort of order first.”

“I’d be glad to.”

“May your name continue to bestow the Buddha’s blessings upon you.” Vajra said as he entered his office where Vajpasana was waiting.

“And infinite serenity to you old friend.” Joining his hands in the Nepalese greeting, bowing slightly.

“This is one of my most senior monks. Yehensho. Originally from Tibet.”

“Peace to you.” Vajpasana said. “Tibet? Excellent, you maybe of help then.”

Yehensho looked surprised.

“Who was your master?”

Yehensho smiled. “I was a Maheketang training with Lama Buston at Samding.”  
As they seated themselves in the bright airy office.

“Yehensho you are a god send. Vajpasana,” turning slightly, “I am glad I came and should have come sooner.”

“You are here now and that is all that matters. Tea?”

They nodded. Vajra tinkled his little bell. Moments later a novice monk entered and was bidden to bring tea for them.

Vajpasana faced Vajra behind his large wooden desk littered with texts. The bookcase to one side was crammed with scrolls, block texts and dog eared books. Their various musty scent gave the room a warm air of studious endeavour. A small smiling Buddha on a pedestal radiated his benevolence. Offerings of oranges in front of him, embellished with flowers. The sun shone through the open window behind his desk. Outside the murmur of people milling about.

“Yehensho you may be of invaluable help.” Vajra repeated. Yehensho remained silent. “I have exchanged thoughts with Vajpasana. Now as I understand the Maheketang are animist. Old Bon. ‘Mahe’ is the buffalo on which Shinjed rides. A metaphor but with these people I would not be surprised if they both materialised in from of my deluded eyes.” Chuckling. “The animal is fearless and can summon demons. Even evil spirits to do its bidding usually for benevolent purposes. But there is another aspect which suits this practice to ours. They train for three years using our breathing exercises.”

“Ch’an.” Was all Yehensho said.

“Three years in complete darkness.” Vajra continued.

“Beautiful.” Vajpasana clapped his hands in delight. A knock and the monk returned with three sweet milky teas on a tray which he left on Vajra’s desk, bowed and departed. They took their cups, sipping with delicious delight the beverage.

“And practice levitation. To make the body lighter hopefully to make for an easier transition when it is time to reincarnate.”

All this was known. Vajpasana nodded his bald head. “I am not too happy in having demons conjured.”

“That is why I wanted Yehensho as Maheketang here. Hm this tea is good.” Vajra said. “Now for the reason of your visit please.”

“Last month Amithama the Rinpoche vanished, literally.”

Yehensho alert whilst remaining calm. Trying to make himself insignificant.

“Disappeared from the face of the earth. Meditating upon an ancient mandala at Sumtek. It is believed it swallowed him. Now at that monastery there is a Nepalese Bombo who knew the mandala, any really as a gateway into the realms of the many worlds within. As these Bombo’s can retrieve lost souls permission was granted to go after him. He too entered and has as yet not returned. Certain information has come our way and there the Most Serene Lama agreed that this active mandala can if misused imperil the world. It might even be controlled by whoever is on the other side. Until we have information from the Bombo we must exercise caution regarding perhaps all mandalas.” Vajra sipping his tea. He really was informed of events.

“Last week I had a vision. I’ve not had one for years. An approaching darkness from the far end of the realms. Of course it could be my muddled mind.” Chuckling again. “As if another realm was beyond the countless realms themselves. Immersed in power. Immense, dimensionless, or maybe mutli dimensional but hidden. Approaching the outer realms, moving through them, taking them over. The gods, the demons of no consequence. Not even the many Buddhas. Swallowing them up. This cannot go on.”

“How can we assist?” Vajpasana asked his serenity unruffled.

Turning to Yehensho Vajra asked: “When was the last time you called forth or immersed yourself with entities from the furthest demon realms?”

“Abbot. Since coming to Swayambhu I have followed the middle path.”

“I understand. So had Bahnum Randa. But you have to answer me, please.”

“Years.”

“Could you return? With our aid?”

“Yes.”

“Here or at Sumtek where it all began?”

“It would make no difference.”

“The idea I have is to interrogate its denizens. Either by insertion or extraction.”

“I am with you.”

“Demons are hungry to attain the next level of enlightenment. We humans are in their way. So the demon chosen must be attuned to our needs.”

“There is some danger.” Yehensho remarked off handedly. They all knew this.

“Extremely so.” The abbot admitted.

“Potential enemies unleashed.” Vajpasana added. Finishing his tea.

“Yes the risk. But remember they are limited in themselves. The greater their activity the sooner their dissipation.”

“You wish for information concerning the visions.” Yehensho correctly surmised.

“One Rinpoche and one Bombo in the other side. Seeking the seekers as a cover to ascertain if this darkness is advancing through the outer realms towards not just us but the centre of the mandala or all mandalas. If that connects with the void...? Correct Abbot?”

“I shudder to think of the consequences.”

“The void as the supreme realm.”

“The configuration of the cosmos is at stake.”

They finished their tea.

### **Vahnsin**

Zohex glorying in his exudence, Merduk realised for some time now had access to his mind. The beauty of it was he could disguise himself, create a persona so that Zohex was under the impression he was in touch with higher beings. Exultant in this horror crafted vaulted recessed chamber in the temple. Infused with Zohex's madness in



welcoming the creation of, Merduk did not yet know if Ahriman was a previous incarnation or the vomit of Zohex's deluded mind. Ahriman's aura all too real. Pure chaos. A pulsating darkness reaching into this world, this time. Aided within this purulent atmosphere by the priests who had executed Mudhan. In her final agony she had defiantly prophesied a mighty destruction upon the Turanian king.

Just thinking of Zohex brought forth Merduk's revulsion as he reclined atop the zigurath in his sacred chamber. Archimage of the celestial vault. It seemed to amuse Zohex who satiated by his nocturnally inspired charnel indulgences was resting in his chamber. Excreting a hell wrought laughter, barbed vibrations as emanations of evil.

Having conquered his immediate enemies. Aware of distant plots. Rumours of renegade Aryans uniting with the southern Dravidians. Forging potent psychic bonds. Zohex indifferent thanks to his current victories. Intoxicated by his pervasively embracing might. Dismissive of distant developments arranged against him. Satisfying his lust with some servant girl.

All the better for Merduk to consider his options. Zohex was present in more than this reality. Thus he was not completely supreme here. A tangential ingress into a distant future desert land. A lesser presence on their home planet of Prima from whence they both hailed. Having destroyed Tellurium and transposed here. Made possible by the advanced technology of the Reganians who were all too absent. Giving the impression of Zohex's supremacy.

Having appropriated the centre of power far out in space. Tenuously linked to this realm. Curtailing Regum's WebSpace, locking it out through the psychic resonant envelope which was a potent barrier thanks to Zohex's dark arts. For the moment all

Merduk could do was deflect Zohex from his insane preoccupation and finish off his mission to allow Regum's ingress to possibly vaporise Zohex out of existence.

The disgusting ceremonies an affront to life itself. A primitive stupidity hopefully self consuming its practitioners. Vahnsin hopefully a lost cause. Merduk rose and surveyed the dark brooding citadel around him. Zohex wanting to be undisputed ruler of this world, of this realm. Doing it that hard way. Previous mistakes by equally evil minds being repeated. On a grander scale. Psychic warfare. Fed by Prima's distant deep visionaries. Zohex perhaps even their construct. Self modified. A rogue essence gone sentient. Only Regum's energised WebSpace could annihilate Zohex's occult manipulation of Earth's natural laws.

Instead, Merduk walking distractedly along the walls of the zigurath, Zohex saw it all as his own created and personally divined perspective. His greed an insufferable overbearing vanity. He returned to the sacred retreat atop the tower where it was thought Merduk communed with the lesser gods. Overcome by a disturbing vision. Was this Zohex's psychic intrusive extension? The image of a blasted city of the future. Forlorn, empty, desolate. Overhead one of Regum's Orbitals. A fetid embrace of a doomed world. Merduk hoped, now that the vision had passed that it was not one of Regum's cities but Vahnsin. The ruins a bleak testament. The gargantuan structures collapsed in a pile of rubble.

Regum's WebSpace had to succeed in extirpating Zohex's projected mania. Banish Earth's mad gods. Realign the planet's resonance to the laws of the universe. The end game far from certain. If things continued as they were.

A discreet cough outside. The brawny head of a soldier begging admittance.

"Well?" Merduk asked tersely.

The soldier laid down his spear and paid obescience by falling on the floor. Merduk hid his humour. Glad the man was a simpleton as were most of those who served Zohex. Let him grovel a little in fear. It would enhance his status amongst the military caste.

Regaining his composure he almost babbled of Zohex's command to attend him. His voice quivering his limbs nearly shaking. Merduk graciously assented, blessed the soldier thinking he might need some security up here.

Merduk made the pretence of bowing in front of Zohex. The latter reclining upon a sumptuous sofa in his marbled reception room. The walls a dazzling design of aqua marine patterns, wildly erratic, disturbing. Wearing his rings of semi precious stones sparkling their scintillating colours. His long black hair contrasting with his hideously taut face, mockery playing in his dark penetrating eyes.

"So priest. You think this kingdom is doomed?"

Merduk guessed at once that Zohex's second sight must serve and hopefully torment him. Sweet beguiling drugged incense wafted from ornate holders in the stifling air. The flames of the wall torches flickering nervously.

"It is but one of many variables lying dormant in the future."

"I need then not fear this premonition." Zohex regaining his composure. "For my power and my will can easily transform what is at present nothing but a fevered delusion of your mind. Reality will always be of my choosing." He emphasised.

"The deeds of the future exist long before mortals venture upon them." Merduk retorted reclining without the kings permission on the soft cushions strewn upon the glaring alabaster floor. "Indeed you are mighty but remember this equilibrium you seek

will not last an eternity.” Vague and humble enough he thought. Weary of Zohex’s limited comprehension he added placatingly, “All I am saying is that change will descend upon us. If we are not prepared it may shake us to our foundations...again.” Hinting at Tellurium’s fate. Even if it had been a ruse to destroy the invaders.

“Felling treachery.”

Zohex’s threats Merduk considered a nuisance. Adopting a mask of infinite patience caring little for Zohex’s dangerous emotions or his demented dreams. He had to divert him, for as long as possible.

Zohex was gazing through the thick stone windows his eyes nearly vacant. He replenished his golden goblet from a servitor offering none to Merduk. The silence for the moment as thick as the smoke from the glowing incense swirling about them. Night’s silence was falling. If Zohex had a queen he could have a progenitor. Anything to keep him from his overweening idea he was master of this world.

“You want Ahriman to do your will. Investing his power unto you. Even gods change if not in complete control. Currently appearing to serve you. Allowing you to create all this yet you dissipate your energies by incessant warfare squashing minor revolts. A secondary power such as a queen might enhance both your power and your status.” Which was rather doubtful.

“You realise I cannot mate with those who are weaker. The renegades are mere vermin preoccupied with their infantile religion and their meaningless lives.”

“There is one person not unsuitable.” Merduk suggested carefully. Give him something to think about. “There is a woman,” Merduk not believing his luck at that thought, “her name is Mudhan, daughter of Vargen, your arch opposite. By uniting with her you will automatically take the sting out of their hatred towards you. Along with their

rebelliousness. So time wasting. Resistance would cease immediately because ultimately the veneration for her would be transferred to you. Simple.”

Zohex’s face blanched. To cover his shock he indulged in a long draught of his wine. The torches’ flames blazing upon the polished goblet.

“Whom did you mention. Mudhan?”

“Yes my lord.” Trying not to mock Zohex. He knew of the stupid sacrifice though having made sure to distance himself from the revolting slaying of an innocent.

“She has been given to the gods according to the ancient rites.” He answered blandly. His voice betraying the slightest of a tremor.

“The powers had brought her into your presence not to be annihilated but so you could transform her latent energy into an even greater potency.” Merduk dissembled. “It was indeed a great opportunity for you. But if as you say she has been sacrificed then that is your will, your doing. Let us hope it is that of Ahriman as well. If you wish I could consult the oracles and find an equitable solution.”

“You need not trouble yourself priest. The serpents as they devoured Mudhan revealed to me a message through their eyes.”

“A message from a serpent?” Merduk asked incredulously.

“To the south the Dravidians have united with the renegade Aryans under a king by the name of Khasnesh in Moerdrum. He is vain and arrogant, pleasing only his senses and so the gods desert him. Now only lesser beings serve him, manipulating his vanity. It is there a woman lives whom I desire. She is in possession of a mighty and unearthly fire. She is the servant of a goddess through whom she rules the king. Needless to say the land is virtually in her possession. I marry her and the kingdom will be mine. You priest will send portents to her, weave a spell around her so that she will desire only me and

simultaneously loathe her king. I will have this woman. Make your preparations and inform me when the powers of the night are in accordance with our divine will. Go now.” And with a flick of his hand encrusted with his sparkling jewels Zohex dismissed him.

Merduk wizened to Zohex’s plan was deep in thought as he crossed the messy courtyard covered in thick mud. So he was going to plant his corrupt seed into the demi goddess. He turned towards the glowering temple precinct, the guards not challenging him. If the serpents possessed occult knowledge then he would through them fathom the mind of this Khasnesh whilst at the same time gathering what he could of the kingdom before embarking on this pathetic scheme.

The further he walked into the temple the more nauseating became the stench of the beasts. He stepped into the final retreat passing the black columns their massive pillars solid and foreboding, inscribed with their eldritch runes. Not being in any hurry he took one of the flickering torches and examined the columns more closely, never having ventured this far into this foul place.

From what he automatically knew of these people and their history these runes glittering in the feeble light looked unearthly. If he was not mistaken they looked like a bad copy of Regum’s computational machines. But that could not be, surely. Where would Zohex’s minions gain such information? Unless there was a connection from some previous time. If that were so then all this might be mere play acting. The only problem the outcome.

His mind was catapulting through too many possibilities. Had there been a previous expedition? Vahnsin was all wrong. Were these columns some sort of attractor? Linking WebSpace with this heinous psychosis? Something was very wrong here. Then

again, he hoped at his supposition, these runes, remarkable as they were in their likeness could be mere coincidence. It gave him hope that all was not predetermined.

Zohex's little task paled in importance. Merduk as he continued into the stink would humour him. His increasing loss of perspective only enhanced with frightening intensity the possible coming calamity. The only problem was not to be overtaken by the events Zohex was unleashing. Since he was here Merduk's vision of the future for Earth now that he knew just how determined Zohex was to align it with Regum's WebSpace. If not then Vahnsin would have to be wasted.

The putrid stench of the beasts reawakened him to his task. In front loomed the pterodactyls in their scaly shining nakedness, blood dripping from their ophidian fangs. They had sensed his presence glowering at him. He calmly returned their stare. Focussing upon them both. They froze into static compliance their eyes darting nervously to and fro trying to avert his gaze. These creatures were truly the hellish declarations of Ahriman. Reflecting, conveying his will, watching over the world of men, creating an aura conducive to this mad reign. Muttering the formulae of his race the entranced scaled serpents became immobilised.

Behind him the sacrificial fires on their raised pedestals threw ghastly shadows against the dripping walls. Merduk decided to improvise for the moment regarding Zohex's demented plan. The daemonic monsters still glared at him but subdued could do little else. Having implanted his instructions into their pea sized brains they would now be his eyes and ears and his mouthpiece of need be. Merduk reasoned that Khasnesh could not rule his vast kingdom with just the aid of his seductive demi goddess. There had to be another incursive something. He would send the beasts out and if they did not

return then Khasnesh did possess real power after all. It would be a welcome distraction. He was certainly not going to risk his mind for Zohex.

He sent them forth. They unfolded their huge batlike wings and with a trailing reek went their way. Linked partially with Merduk's symbiosis to fathom the real power of Khasnesh. He returned to his zigurath knowing it would not be until daybreak at least until the beasts were even close to their destination.

### **New Delhi**

Entering his bookshop Jamin looked with satisfaction at Abu.

"Allah akbar. Another profitable encounter." Jamin extracting the folded bundle of money and waved it in front of his friend's radiant face. With his deft hands the money vanished back into his folded grey tunic.

"They pay well." Abu added as an afterthought. It was midday. Down time during the atrocious heat. The ceiling fans merely moving the hot air around. No one would disturb them.

"Yes it makes me wonder." Jamin said thoughtfully playing with his sleeve. "Is it sabotage they are considering. All that information about the topography of the location, of the valley. Unusual to take such an interest in Balkh and Maza-e-Sharif. You know we caught one of them, someone called Semenov there. But the Russians have no respect even for their own. Bogden was disposed of right in front of the professor. We must be cautious. These people are dangerous."

"And now they are back." Abu finished off. "They are feeling confident, surely."

"Or extremely stupid. It is arrogant."



“If it is not the ever present Russians it’s the Americans or the Germans.” Then as if dismissing the meddling outsiders as a mere inconvenience continued: “What does it matter? We have our aim to think of, to execute.” Abu though felt slightly disconcerted dealing with the Soviets. Then more to console himself added, “Anyway money is money.”

“Which reminds me. We have not heard from our friend in Varanasi. I wonder if he is deliberately avoiding us.”

“Perhaps the incantations in the book killed him or if he has been successful he may think it is not necessary to honour his side of the bargain.”

“No Abu. Dead he is not.” Jamin said with deliberation. “Nothing has disturbed the celestial realm. Pay him a visit. See what he is precisely up to. Play him along without forcing the issue. If he proves to be difficult then impress upon him our intentions to repossess the book. No refund. That ought to force his hand along our preferred direction.”

“His nemesis? Either way we shall obtain what we require.”

“Yes. Discovering the location. Now Abu,” Jamin smiled as he counted out several hundred rupees handing them into Abu’s outstretched hand, “we both have work to do.”

“Gladly at that. May Allah protect us.”

“He will.”

They left the bookshop making sure the ‘closed’ sign was prominent and parted downstairs. Outside it was hot and humid. Abu melded into the ever present sea of humanity whilst Jamin headed towards Old Delhi where he resided in one of the lodges straddling the many bazaars.

When visiting the city he preferred to live amongst the people of the markets and the street. Meeting the locals and the itinerant. They loved to talk and he loved to listen, learning all the time. And amongst the rejects of society, the struggling urban poor, the destitute and the desperate Jamin had his perfect camouflage.

Two days later, sitting in the bookshop in the early evening the telephone rang. It was the expected call from Varanasi. Abu informed Jamin that his namesake had been delighted with the book although he pretended otherwise. Badly at that. It appeared his wife Savarna was scrutinising its contents with far greater fervour than her husband. What was of further interest was that she devoted herself solely to Kali. A dangerous omen. Should he retrieve the book?

“Let them covet it. Let them value it beyond all else. They do not know the real reason for their sudden good fortune as you well know. We will be there with them when the time comes.” Jamin imagining the sneering smile of Abu at the other end.

“It will please me well if they continue to default on the payment which is precisely what they are doing. If there is karma they will deserve it.” Abu sniggered. Jamin relaxed, everything was going well.

“Praise be to Allah.” Abu said though he was surrounded by the traditions and living mythologies of Hindu life.

“Indeed yes. See him again in a few days. Keep up the pressure and keep me informed. Do not extort the money. I will meet you in Peshawar at the end of next week at the usual address.”

“Before you hang up Jamin there is something which may be of interest. He had a visitor recently. The man just cannot help justifying his own importance. He claims to be

an acquaintance and working colleague, a Doctor Tamralipti. The man is on some sort of sabbatical and has just returned from Nepal. He claims they are researching ancient artefacts. Surat is playing the salamander and as usual poorly. His pretentiousness will be his undoing. He wants to make himself important in our eyes as if it is we who are nothing.”

“You think they have the location?” Jamin aware of their search which hopefully their difficult customer, as an occultist would find for them. The ancient temple of the lost gods of central Asia.

“His veneer is a sham but then I would not wish to disturb his illusions. Unfortunately after taking some strong drink, may Allah have mercy, Surat rising in his perceived self importance spoke not just of this Tamralipti but another foreign doctor and his team of researchers. Like the Russians. Interested in Balkh. The signs could not be any clearer.”

“It cannot be this easy. Russians aside.”

“Not necessarily. We know what Surat is up to as much as the Russians. The others with Allah’s will might be on the same trail. We follow the plan. Interference from these two hostile quarters converging on Afghanistan will simplify things.”

“You are right. Let all of them follow the trail. A lot will depend on unwitting aid. Their respective appetites have been aroused and I assume they will do anything to achieve whatever it is they are after. Surat wants the tablet. I assume the foreigners at least want the location and the Russians perhaps both. We can deal with all of them. This is extremely fortunate for us.” Jamin said joyfully though he rarely gave vent to his emotions. He felt elated with which their precise plan was progressing. How predictable human nature was.

“Until Peshawar then.”

“Yes until then. May Allah be with you.”

“And you friend.”

## Varanasi

Having prepared themselves for another night in their private temple on the outskirts across the river Savarna reflected, prior her ascent into the world of the Black Goddess how good fortune had allowed her husband in bringing to light this dangerous and foreboding text. Lost in vestigial times, spoken of only in whispered innuendoes in conclaves of the ancient line of Rishis, they too had discerned the terrible secrets it contained. Knowing lest the profane draw down some from long forgotten dangerous spheres of hell, the wisest of their kind had kept the deadly secret hidden from tampering minds. Until now.

This time there would be no blood sacrifice. Unflinchingly Savarna had put herself in a trance. The penumbra of Kali immersed in thick ebon fumes. Black tapers shone their stellate lights upon the goddess. Sibilant chanting resonated eerily from Savarna's possessed mind as she gathered about her unearthly forces contained by the mantras of the book. Her inexorable incantations were executed with fastidious care. They had to be for there was no room for error. The soft vibrant voice of her prayers enhanced her inner perspicacious capabilities recreating still unknown worlds where ancient gods lay awaiting the call to resurrect their eclipsed powers.

Her supplications echoed throughout the hidden cavern. Calling forth dreadful revelations from the text Savarna's hallow shrieks thrust upon the goddess her prurient urge. With ashen face her body contorted in front of the thralling altar. Her limbs twisted

into crippling contortions, her joints creaked, her arms wrenched in scurrilous motions as the fierce tempest invaded her body and mind.

Her demonically pitched voice ebbed disconcertingly as a purulent liquid flowed from her mouth whilst she vomited forth fearsome exaltations. Kali screamed bloody curses at the foreign intrusion. Images of burnt corpses flung impiously about in furious blasphemous sacrilege. Vituperative and paroxysmic the alien echoes screamed their despicable warning at her. A tenebrous wind howled through the cave. A abruptly as it had come the invasive revelation ceased. Savarna gasped for breath. Her light cotton garment clinging to her sweated body like a vamped lichen cloak.

Abu stumbled about in dread terror, gibbering like a loon. Savarna knew this to be a terrible warning from Kali. An emissary of Chaos, a perverse enmity had invaded their sanctum. She chanted in desperation analeptic mantras. This book was more than it appeared and one persistent thought tore with lightning certainty through her distraught mind: it was not she who had delved into forbidden spheres rather it was something which had entered this realm from some outer darkness. She tried to breathe deeply, rhythmically trying to recover her temporarily disturbed sanity.

It had been worth it. She had seen again the mountain from whence the tablet originated. And this time the premonition she felt was as to its whereabouts: in northern Afghanistan. A trail had been etched into her mind. Signs posted in the guise of valleys, hills and finally the mountain retreat where an ancient valley harboured its monumental secret.

Since her husband's experience rendered him useless it was left to Savarna to drive them back to their flat. The warmth of daylight acted like a restorative soothing her

torn mind. By the time they arrived back home the baneful event she had felt had considerably waned in its terrifying revelation.

They both entered their home totally subdued, shocked into silence. Entering the library it looked dangerous for the first time. The worm eaten books, the ungodly testaments of perverse gods delving into cavernous vistas of unstable minds stirred within her notions not akin to human nature. In an ocean of anticipating, encumbering silence. Here she felt the power of strange eons with hideous secrets where appalling indulgences told of awesome struggles clawing to reach repellent resurrections thanks to this mysterious book of Abu.

Exhausted and debilitated Surat sank into a deep depression. Savarna though refused to give in. She had ventures into such forlorn realms before but the horror of the night had been nothing but extraordinary to say the least.

Neither stirred. Abu lying on the couch. Savarna sitting at the writing desk staring into blank space. A knock on the front door roused her out of her lethargy. She pulled herself together collecting her wits so as to create a semblance of normalcy. They had both completely forgotten that Abu from Delhi was to pay another visit. Savarna hoped he would give him the money and be done with it.

The small man entered and smiled. His startling eyes looked from Savarna to Abu. Her husband smiled weakly but the impression he received from the bookseller did not console his shattered nerves. He directed his gaze to his wife and rose with a tendentious effort of civility. Savarna was wary of him as he feigned an innocence which felt unnatural.

They spoke politely in the living room about nothing in particular. Her husband excused himself giving her more than just a fleeting moment to study their visitor. His

appearance was nothing but a captious and pellucid illusion. Beneath his masked semblance of intellectual urbanity Savarna could sense an ireful enmity. Abu's uncanny incongruity disturbed and alerted her. She checked her erratic emotions still shaken by what had occurred at the temple. His voice, thin and fawning created within her an instant sense of hostility.

"The book. We must come to some agreement." Abu said smoothly. Ignoring the impertinence of not being offered the customary tea.

"My husband will deal with this. You wish for some tea?"

"Please." Chiding himself.

She went into the kitchen and boiled some water. Waiting she called out: "I thought or should I say I am under the impression that his book concerned itself with our ancient history. But now I am convinced it reflects something other than mere promises suggestive of archetypal powers."

Abu remained silent. Then after a long moment bestirred himself to speak.

"It is a work of antiquity your husband so eagerly desires. Its rarity is highly valued, especially its veracity pertaining to its power of apotheosis. From what I can gather this actual copy comes from Peshawar. The lithographs as you might be aware are interpolations. The original we believe is a translation of an ancient Persian text faithfully copied by Buddhist pundits who must have had the selfsame originals at Taxala." His voice unemotional. Reciting assumed facts.

The kettle boiled and Savarna excused herself. Abu remained silent as she prepared the tea. The cups poured she handed one to her visitor.

"Hm. Excellent tea. Thank you."

"Older than the Vedas?" Savarna probed.



“I am not sure. Equal to I would suggest. The Vedas are truly enlightened books but this here speaks of other things. The Vedas relate to the human condition such as it is. But in this they are limited focussing upon purely human dimensions thus clouding rather than revealing to us the world and the universe. The extravasated phenomena of this text of yours is I believe truly unnameable. What secrets our ancient earth holds she has kept well hidden. This text belongs really to other masters. It deals with as a treatise on the nature of chaos and creation hitherto hidden from our mundane explorations. It is possible these mantras are a refocussing of an ancient and somewhat diasporic knowledge.” He sipped his tea and continued, “which I assume you have begun to chart. I value your attempt at this mystery.” Looking directly at Savarna he continued.

“It is a sign reflecting your intelligence and your knowledge relating to this most difficult of texts. We need not necessarily fear these powers.” He edged her on assuming correctly they both wished to be assured of the path they had chosen, “the shock of the experience is merely the direct expression of that immeasurable gulf between the known and familiar and that which is brought forth by the experience in the mind. The enmity you may feel is I think the augmentation of exactly that of which the sacred text speaks of as Chaos. Coloured chiefly by our cultural impregnations and our social setting and upbringing.” He said disarmingly.

“A sallow resurrection arises due to neglect if left in rank gardens hidden within the labyrinthine memories our conscious mind so busily glosses over.” Savarna replied more to herself by way of clarification. She just hoped the vision had been primarily a more violent aspect of Kali. With that she could cope. Still there lingered an urge in those cataclysmic visions hinting at mocking diabolisms foreign to her knowledge. Forming as it were a parallel path in her quest.

Her mind finally cleared of the fiery impregnation into which she had been led. It gave her hope.

Abu smiled for he knew he had managed to place his desire upon these two ostentatious adepts.

Savarna knew in turn she would return to the gates of this other universe. They would find the ancient vault which would infuse her and her husband if he was lucky even if through satanic enchantments, the secrets of that long lost age.

“What do you intend to do?”

“You will have your money.” Savarna said evenly.

### **Peshawar, Pakistan**

Abu descended clumsily from the wooden horse drawn tandem taxi handing the driver several rupees. The recipient bowed his head slightly then trotted off ornamental bells jingling pleasantly. The street he was in was in a serene section of suburban Peshawar, a city rich and green during the wet season, a dust bowl at all other times.

Abu had come to meet Jamin at their old friend's house, a rich merchant by the name of Ghias-un-din-Tuqlak. He breathed with deep satisfaction the lush moist fragrant laden air blinking with abandoned ease around him. Nobody had followed. Walking through an open iron gate hinged upon high thick stone walls he was quickly enclosed in the verdurous garden of the Pathan's mansion. He entered the manicured scene with its assiduously levelled lawn and delicately shaped hedges, crunching his way up the gravel drive under a canopy of evergreen trees. The small villa was not ostentatious or pompous unlike the surrounding residences. It was a plain design known from Morocco to Tibet.

The main door was opened by a white robed butler. Abu welcomed the coolness within the thick walled house. He heard the faint click of an intricate mechanism as the door shut. Outside a metallic clang indicated the gate was secured. Removing his shoes he was presented with an ornately painted porcelain bowl containing rose scented water. Washing his feet and hands the servant waited discreetly. The ablutions finished leading Abu to the meeting in the guest room. They passed through two oaken doors, varnished to a shining mirrored finish.

Inside the guest room he saw the familiar wall carpets with its scenes depicting romantic adventures mingled with imaginative flights of fancy from the Koran. A black raven looking man, rose. Head of Jamin's tribe he was introduced to Bal Gandachar Serinda tall and pale like so many of the Turkmen chiefs of Balkh. The other man was Shuja-din-Ghuri who would head their mission as overall leader and responsible to secure the location once certain events manifested themselves.

They embraced each other in turn and welcomed Abu with warm greetings. His eyes had fully adjusted to the cool light as he sat on a low chair in front of an equally low

table where they were enjoying a hookah. He was offered his nozzle which Abu accepted thankfully. A servant poured him a cup of fresh coffee, an honour indeed.

Abu cleared his throat and spoke of his journey. Relating his meeting with Surat. They remained respectfully silent. The thick swirling fragrant nicotine was caught by a gentle breeze moving through the intricately worked lattice walls keeping the room cool during the muggy autumn.

Having finished his intelligence Jamin explained that they had arranged safe passage for them through to Balkh. Travelling north of both the Pakistani and Afghan checkpoints thanks to arrangements made with the respective chiefs of the various mountain tribes. This had been accomplished by the Pathan through a series of dialogues and diplomatic meetings arranged by Serinda and Tuqlaq Jamin added that from Surat he had learned of the westerners who were on the trail to Afghanistan but had not as yet been sighted.

“There is another problem.” Jamin stated cautiously. “For a while now some Russians have once again become interested in the valley.” Rubbing his stubby beard in thought.

“We know.” Shuja continued, “that the westerners have an idea of where the Russians had been and we must assume they will follow. Now the westerners for the moment we must keep an eye on but the Russians are another matter. Them we must stop.”

“We could arrange an accident.” Serinda suggested, puffing away.

“I wish that to be our last resort.” The water bubbling in the hookah.

“Why not now, here in Peshawar before they cross the border? Who would implicate us if suddenly something were to happen to them? We know the Pakistanis, especially the ISI have no love for them.” Serinda proposed.

“It would not be that easy. For starters they are more than likely to be with or are KGB. To set up an accident would require a lot of work and planning. But there is no reason why we cannot delay them.”

“Do we have anybody at the passport office?” Jamin asked.

“I do not think so, why?”

“We could hold up their application to enter Afghanistan.”

“Or better still steal their passports.” Serinda remarked.

“It sounds like a good idea.” Abu said joyfully.

“No. For starters baksheesh could work against us. But obviously we must deal with them.” Shuja making their point.

They all smoked for a while.

“I have an idea. Serinda has a point.” Shuja continued. “The Russians who will be coming shortly will need embassy assistance to complete their journey to Kabul. After what happened the last time, entering clandestinely and Bogden getting blown away by us means they wish this time to make their research official. Certainly it will be difficult to deal with them since they are agents, some at least but,” he winked mischievously “we have excelled with similar problems before.”

“Let us abduct them.” Shuja suggested. “I can easily arrange it once they have crossed the border.”

“Tempting but it would arouse too much suspicion and possibly attract the sort of attention we do not want. This in turn might alert the others. No. This time,” Jamin told

them, “we must take no chances. My family alone have fought the Russians from our homes as had my fathers and their fathers before them in Uzbekistan and I am sure we can tackle this man and whoever they bring, maybe the women, KGB or not.” Jamin relaxed knowing what had to be done. It would not be too difficult.

The Indian Airlines Fokker Friendship descended into the brown haze which immersed the Peshawar Valley in the humid afternoon air. Brown jumbled buildings were scattered like dice heaped over each other, broken sporadically by patches of green that appeared as if they had been inserted by a careless painter onto a dusty canvas.

Konstantin was looking out of the window eager as a child. He was apprehensive though. Taking this Indian, Abu with them was a breach of security but the embassy had conceded to the overall plan. In case something went wrong they needed a fall guy. Klara and Rina were seated somewhere behind him. Total strangers.

Mayhem the usual state of affairs in any Asiatic airport greeted them at the arrival lounge. Jamin was already at hand flanked by Abu to see them through the turmoil of customs.

Klara always suspicious was at odds when she discovered they were to go in separate cars. After some raucous arguing she insisted on being driven with Rina and Semenov. Jamin the perfect gentleman helped the gruff Klara into the arranged waiting car securing their luggage. Jamin looked at his watch.

Konstantin clutching his attaché case was in a better mood by now. The previous threat of the Afghan at Balkh would have to be dealt with but with their journey being official this time he did not think they would dare to carry out their threat. To think as he watched the crowds mill about him, fume belching buses and taxies in organised chaos,

the distant mountains a mere brown hazy outline that in a few days he would actually be in one of the most potent and possibly powerful places on this planet. All arranged by Moscow through their respective embassies and using local contacts which lightened his mood.

Jamin, looking severe Konstantin felt he could trust. There was something noble about this Pathan. Rina smiled at him as they sat in the large back seat of the Soviet Zhil, Klara riding shotgun up front. They were to drive directly to Kabul a day's drive away.

By now the real, original Soviet staff car was currently safely hidden in one of Shuja's garages, the chauffeur dead. His body had been sent through a meat mincer and was fertilising his fragrant rose garden. Their current 'driver' started the well tuned motor. Abu and Jamin got into a taxi behind them which just happened to be owned by a friend of theirs.

Jamin congratulated himself on the simplicity of this neat and effective self protecting plan they had hatched. A gullible traveller, speaking Russian whom they had bribed with reluctant exorbitance thundered down the tarmacked road as recklessly as the locals. Foot on the accelerator, hand on the horn. The cab with Abu and Jamin slowly increased its relative distance behind the Zhil.

Jamin and Abu saw the limousine burst violently into a roaring ball of fire as the rear doors and windows were blown out. Engulfed in sickening yellow orange, flames flared through the cavities of the car, the boot lid flying drunkenly through the air. The burning occupants were torn to pieces by the detonation. The incineration of the diesel tank, the sudden death of the driver had the car lurch dizzily, flames belching forth scattering bicycles and cars in all directions, forcing an oncoming bus off the road and into a ditch.

Jamin's cab stopped while they watched the blackened blistered wreck of the Zhil and its grizzly contents burn furiously. They could hear the approach of sirens and rather leave they like so many others stayed and watched and gaped at the scene of horror. Leaving would have aroused suspicion as the crowd grew jabbering and pointing. Thick black smoke poured from the burning tyres. Some of the flaming fuel had spread over the road and the tar itself was alight around the car. The police, fire brigade and ambulance were racing up the road. The police were efficiently moving the inquisitive back asking the many witnesses their account of the tragedy. Everybody had seen the car suddenly engulfed in flames. Nobody knew who its occupants were.

Jamin and Abu were safe from suspicion for the moment. He had sent one of his men south to collect the necessary parts to build the bomb. As such it had been fabricated from pilfered stores taken from an army depot in Baluchistan, a rebellious area which always was a headache for the government in Islamabad. That should keep the investigators busy for a while. Even the case containing the parts originated in Quetta.

The police took their statements. The fire by now had been brought under control and traffic was slowly directed around the burnt out wreckage. Jamin's last act was to refrain Abu from taking a photograph of the macabre catafalque.



### **Towards Kabul**

“To our last night in this pleasant country. A pity our friend Praj is not here but he had to go to Varanasi to check out a lead.” Rosenberg lifting his glass of red after a sumptuous feast coming from Mahindra’s kitchen. He quaffed the French Cabernet Sauvignon with a pleasant sigh. Refilling his glass Max and Martin helped themselves to another can of Fosters. Nepal had just three beers available. “And to our latest recruit, Yehensho.”

Yehensho dressed in the style of the Nepalese smiled and helped himself to a cup of green tea. Mahindra busy clearing the plates, laughing with them, exclaiming what good customers they had been. Tomorrow the place becoming a lodge for travellers once

more. She regretted their leaving saying cooking for four was easier than all the individuals who would again be her guests.

“What made you leave Swayambhu?” Max asked lighting a Marlboro.

“The tablet.” Yehensho answered. “It’s not really an integral part of their history which you verified. It got the abbot thinking. We spoke about it. He thinks it is too negative and as such decided it had no place in the monastery.” He shrugged his shoulders emphasising the indifference the abbot had for the artefact.

Yehensho thought about the conversation with the two abbots. He had not conjured the demons as they were unhappy with the practice of dark magic there. One of the reasons he allowed Yehensho to have the tablet for the monk reasoned that if Rosenberg knew where it had come from then that is where it belonged.

Telling him that his unique training in Tibet was of some worth. So far Rosenberg had no idea that the mandala at Sumtek and this tablet might in any way be connected. The further these two objects were apart the better.

“Have you tried to decipher it.” Rosenberg asked, admiring the light in his glass.

“Yes.” Martin perked at that. “I think it is an effect rather than a cause. It represents a remnant of obscure knowledge.”

Rosenberg nodded sagely. Martin said nothing. Maybe he was wrong.

“The runes upon it have to be approached carefully. In our current state of mind we know so little. We have no key.” Yehensho sipping his tea.

‘I have.’ Martin thought.

“I’ve been thinking,” Rosenberg said after a momentary silence. “maybe just maybe,” he emphasised with his lit pipe, “this comes from a time when Moses received

on a tablet the magic runes of the commandments. It might be from the lost tribe and contain the hundredth name of Yahweh.”

“Really.” Max sitting up. “No disrespect but assumptions like this are a bit unscientific wouldn’t you say?”

“Not at all.”

“I mean you are pushing history here.”

“It might be pushing itself.”

“I doubt it. Only humans do that. not objects.”

‘You might be surprised.’ Martin thought. Must be the booze talking.

“You are certain of that?” Rosenberg challenged him. All eyes were in Max.

“Not certain, no. But reading the Old Testament into this is not kosher, pardon the pun.” Max smiled. “You see me being an atheist I’ve got no deep seated religious preconceptions although I could go along with the idea that this thing could possess, ahm, certain attributes if we let it.” Emphasising the last four words.

“I agree.” Yehensho added.

Rosenberg puffed at his pipe, his head obscured by pale blue smoke.

Max then said: “Let me put it this way then. We agree it’s ancient, obscure containing what secrets we know not. But we have historic precedents. Buddhist scriptures hint at potent books hidden on this planet awaiting discovery. Am I correct?” directing the question at Yehensho. The latter nodded.

“Good.” Pushing on. “We have evidence from the annals of mythology lore ante dating pre-deluvian races far superior in power than history will give credit to. Plenty of hints exist even in the Old Testament. Garbled and confused true but there never the less. Someone created this encapsulating their wisdom and quest for their conception of their

god or gods. And the reason for this is simple. Like all humans with half a brain they were after power. But things can go wrong, have done and will again.”

‘Hope not.’ Martin mused.

“Like the secret of Babel which a wrathful and psychotic deity blasted so that what they knew would remain in oblivion until the end of time.” Max finished off.

The silence was immediate. Martin a little embarrassed opened another can of beer and helped himself to one of Max’s cigarettes.

“If that is the case Max then there is even a greater reason for us to possess this tablet. Whilst not tempting fate either.” Rosenberg calm.

“So you’re not after whatever secret it harbours?”

“Coming from a scientist like yourself I am indeed surprised. Knowledge is everything surely. It dispels ignorance.”

“Ignorance is a state of mind. It has nothing to do with knowledge.” Yehensho said.

“I disagree.” Rosenberg replied, sucked on his pipe and found it had gone out. He relit it, then poured himself another glass of red.

“The West made great strides in the last few centuries. No one is doubting that Doctor Rosenberg.” Yehensho said calmly. “I think we have a different definition of knowledge. To you it is clarification of the real world, of nature and the universe. To us in the East it is clarification of perception, of the mind. If the mind is muddled then so will be the knowledge with which it deals. But I agree that the two must go hand in hand. That is why this object we have must be approached with circumspection. The wrathful deity which destroyed Babel could well be a metaphor not unlike that which befell your Doctor Faustus. The calamity could be psychological.”

“Excellent analysis.” Max chimed in. Draining his beer. Onto the next one.

“The thing is,” Yehensho continued, “not to be enthralled by it. It might not have any power what so ever. Then the danger is that what you wish to find you will. But even that can be a threat for when psychic energy is projected, unless one has a strong and calm mind, that psychic force could come into its own.”

“And then the shit hits the fan.” Max concluded.

“Thank you for that.” Rosenberg replied cynically.

“You may be pursuing a dream Doctor Rosenberg and dreams as we all know can turn into nightmares.” Yehensho said soberly. He was drinking green tea after all.

Rosenberg held up his hands disarmingly. “Gentlemen. This is not some frantic vision or a burning pursuit of mine. We all know the orientation of our research and its aim at defusing any danger that may arise. I have no personal interest in this. Nor am I aiming to reconstitute my heritage in any way. It was just a thought. Something dreadful did occur at Babel. Whether as concrete history or as a psychological metaphor. What I do not wish, what our research institute does not wish is for any of this to recur.”

“Agreed.” Said Max.

“Agreed.” Yehensho concurred. Martin nodded.

“I am glad gentlemen. Now to plan our next stage. From certain sources of information we have, we know that the Soviets are interested in a particular spot in Afghanistan.” Martin wondering who Rosenberg and his institute really were. “We know the place is near Balkh up in the north. Now if we all go at once it will attract the attention of the government there. You are well aware they are in the orbit of the Soviets.”

“They are?” Martin surprised.

“So what I suggest is this: Praj is in Varanasi making certain enquiries. He will join me later. But you Max and Martin and not forgetting our esteemed guest Yehensho and this is up to you if you wish to travel separately but split up we must. You can work that out amongst yourselves. Personally I think Yehensho should travel on his own.”

He looked relieved.

“It is rare for westerners to travel with locals but not always. Tomorrow we will leave separately. You three remain behind for a few days as tourists.” Which Johann thought amusing. “Given what we possess we have the advantage. Yehensho will keep the tablet. As a man of the cloth he will arouse no suspicion. The Afghanis might be Muslims but as long as Yehensho has no religious artefacts offensive to them and that ought to include the tablet then I see no reason that we should not meet in two weeks in Kabul. What do you say?”

“I’m having another beer.” And Max opened another two cans handing one to Martin. “How safe is it up north?”

“Safe. As long as you leave their women alone, don’t cheat them then they will respect you. They are an honourable people.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Max said relieved. “What about my darling wife. And Martin with his girlfriend?”

“There is no harm in telling her where you’re off to. I doubt anyone would notice.”

“Good.”

“How are we going to get into contact then?” Yehensho asked.

“Each of you will have a letter waiting at the ‘post restante’ section of the Kabul general post office. I’ve got travellers cheques for you here right now. There ought to be

enough to see you all through for a month at least just in case things go wrong. You have your air tickets I assume in case the bottom really falls out of all of this. Any other questions?"

"How did you know where to go?"

"Research." Rosenberg said blandly.

"Sure. You left Iraq, went via India to Nepal and now Afghanistan. You're more than just an academic researcher from some obscure fraternity in West Berlin. City of spooks."

"Maximillian. How can you say such a thing." Johann shocked.

"Just asking. Because if that's all you were then I would be worried."

Rosenberg narrowed his eyes wondering what Max was driving at. "Go on." He said carefully.

"No back up."

"In what way. Other researchers you mean?"

"No. Not researchers. Rather people with clout."

The next morning Rosenberg fussed over his departure. The baggage was piled up at the entrance. A hoot from a dilapidated taxi and Johann shook hands with Max, then Martin, bowed to Yehensho with Max feeling all a blur.

"Kabul then. Remember, the general post office."

Martin stood a little back. His head thick as a brick.

"Your visas in order?"

"Not yet. Will be done today. Unless at the border." Max answered.

"Do it here or in India."

“Right.”

“Well then, see you there.”

“Oh Johann, we’re, that is Martin and I will go by train to Peshawar.”

“Fine. If you get delayed you know where to write.”

“Gotcha.”

“At the Afghani border negotiate a taxi to Kabul.”

“Sure.”

“Now I’ve got a good idea where the site is. So we shouldn’t be there too long. In and out before the Russians even know we were there.” Watching the cabbie load his luggage.

“Time to go. The plane is waiting.”

“See ya.” Max laconic.

New Delhi Central is, to say the least, trying on anybody’s patience. The Indians seemed to have plenty of it. The locals told them buying a ticket could take up to four hours. Having achieved that it took another two hours to find the right carriage for the Amritsar Express. With a cabin to themselves they watched the hawkers trying to sell them all sorts of things even with the whistle blowing as the long train steamed out of New Delhi.

The countryside was green for the monsoonal rains had arrived. The plains, the meadows and trees fresh and bright. Nature looking relieved, regenerated with a burst of bucolic life. The train rushed past villages, small towns whose main activity seemed to be weaving and cloth making. Farmers ploughed their fields in the time honoured tradition with gentle white oxen, bullock carts at level crossings laden with grain surrounded



everywhere by people along with the colourful trucks of India. The journey was fast, the train noisy and after ten hours they pulled into Amritsar. Though the mountains leading to Kashmir were close the air was incredibly humid. In their overnight hotel where a jug of water had been placed in their room they had to leave it outside for the evaporation of the water made the room, with a ceiling fan too humid to sleep in.

The next day they caught a local bus to the border. A cheap ride at five rupees. Passing the ruins of the '71 war with Pakistan. A few burnt out small shops, charred bricks, fallen in rooves, a few blasted factories, windows smashed, gaping holes showing the devastation. The road was sealed but bumpy passing at one stage a modern university. The bus was almost empty with three other westerners which finally ground to a halt at the border.

Being a Sunday they had to wait until 9 am for the customs official and the change of guard to arrive. They exchanged their Indian currency for Pakistani rupees at the outrageous 1:1 rate. The money changer said the banks were closed and that was that. One of Martin's notes had the metal strip missing counterfeiting being a hobby in these parts. The man was in a good mood, took the dilapidated note knowing he could palm it off into another unsuspecting tourist. Customs was a mere formality. The officials friendly probably to encourage visitors their way.

Another antiquated bus was waiting to take them to Lahore and within minutes it was overcrowded with jabbering commuters. It took only several minutes to reach the railway station. A medieval conglomeration replete with towers and turrets. The train would not arrive for another four hours and so they went to the railway restaurant to get a bite to eat.

The locals inquisitive. Waiting bored them so they struck up conversations. Four Pakistani's said in the next war they would beat India. Max asked them "then what?" A frowning silence with one inspired reply to avenge their brothers in East Pakistan. Studiously avoiding its new name of Bangladesh. What they had meant was East Kashmir.

An hour later they were still at it. The Indians had used Russian pilots after the Pakistani air force had shot down India's elite pilots. So the illogical conversation went on, already past tense in India.

The train arrived and though with slightly bruised ego's the Punjabi's as mentally hot as the weather bade them their good byes. This train an electric diesel the compartment roomy and around midnight they set off westwards.

Dawn broke. The countryside was marred by erosion, studded with pale green grass, small stunted trees and an array of gullies scattered everywhere. To the north pale blue jagged mountains. They passed the occasional clustered huts built out of sun bleached clay, thatched rooves, then the odd factory and stopped at Ravalpindi. Two more carriages were coupled onto the train and off through the marred countryside.

Slowly the land flattened out. The train crossed many dried up river beds and the usual gullies as the mountains, with not a tree on them loomed closer. In the train's wake clouds of dust. The settlements thinned out and soon nothing. Nomads appeared and vanished, passing stations in the middle of nowhere, through a tunnel over a iron girdered bridge, actually the Kabul river amongst rocky desolation. Then a dusty railway station. They had reached the other side of Pakistan. Peshawar.

The sun was blinding, the breeze merely stirring the hot air about. Jostling through the ever present pushy, noisy crowd outside the dusty station a rickshaw driver

spotted them, or rather their money and their ignorance. Walking he took them to a lay up area where a beautiful wooden tandem waited. The chestnut brown horse, well fed with no protruding ribs, having gained their custom, pulled them along in the open two wheeler sitting on cushioned seats. It would cost but the ride was worth it,

The border he informed them as they clattered down the road would stay open until six. Since it was midday they had plenty of time. The buses around them pulling away belching diesel fumes packed to the rafters. They bounded over pot holes and stones, dodged people who stared at them as if they were visitors from another realm as they galloped jauntily into the bazaar surrounded, like in Kathmandu by three to five storey buildings the newer ones out of concrete. Entering the maze of the bazaar the older structures appeared straight out of the 'Arabian Nights'. Well designed as only Islamic architecture can be the clean lines and rich patterns of ornamental woodwork was a delight in intricacy. For Martin the whole reason for being here was becoming ever more peripheral. He kept his thoughts to himself. Max was the seasoned traveller. He too had said nothing pertaining the very reason for their presence in these wonderful lands, the vibrant culture and the effervescent people. The idea of ancient hidden gods transported back into the time of distant mythology evaporating in the humidity.

The bazaar showed off the prosperity of the city. Watermelons, mangoes, apples bananas, pears, grapes, cloth of all colours, silks, utensils all on display. The sun mottled under a profusion of plane trees. They meandered through countless corners, twists and turns feeling totally lost when suddenly they came into an open square the fumes alone announcing their destination. Transit departures. Buses everywhere. Max paid, the retrieved their luggage Martin impressed by the intricate and ornate patterns painted on the buses.

The drivers were all shouting wildly their destinations but Max knew where he was going. Finding the one they wanted Max paid for three seats so they could be more comfortable in these strange reconstructed Bedford trucks. Finally full they left in a dense blue cloud of noxious fumes, lurching off towards the border.

Green lush trees everywhere. Martin too impressed to even focus on Rosenberg's expedition and its dark underlying causes. Or causations. The buildings and recessed residences were surrounded by well watered lawns, manicured gardens, a little bit of England Martin mused. Once past the Islam College, a strange conglomeration of a Gothic pile they gained in altitude. Behind them the valley where in a grey brown huddle the city hung under a pall of brown smog.

The country was wild and barren. Rocky red mountains littered with huge boulders haphazardly strewn about as if some giant had had a tantrum. No vegetation except for some tufts of grass, shrivelled as the bus chugged its way up the inclining road barely wide enough for two vehicles. Following a disused railway line the road with treacherous bends and a sharp lethal drop to one side. Even the sediments laid down eons ago were as twisted and churned as the history of this area. If the bus was going to go any slower it was going to roll backwards. They did make it over the first rise following precariously the side of the mountain. Atop a small plateau a huge red fort announcing the 'Khyber Rifles'. The surrounding hills studded with gun towers built of red sandstone guarding the barren countryside against bandits and marauders. Living history. At night the road closed to any but the locals. The bus wheezed its way into an ugly grubby town dominated by a huge bunker. Everybody clambered out glad to stretch their legs.

Martin had a coke getting sick of the local sweet tea. Max as well. A local came up offering to sell them morphine and hashish which they politely declined. Max pointed

to the border down the valley in front of them. A stream, a road, trees clustered around the tiny customs shed. The bus they found out would not go down the last few bends so on to an open truck they piled. A family with a few chickens joined them, packed like sardines as they were and with a gear crunching lurch were off down the hill. The driver saving on fuel riding the brakes. Not recommended. Then what sounded like a shot. Everybody alert. A flat tyre. No refund either.

An hour later they arrived at the border. A rather quaint idea given the terrain they were in. Most of the locals had vanished into the hills. At customs they were asked if they had any hashish on them. Max looked at them evenly meaning 'as if...' The soldiers laughed, they had their passports stamped and were now officially in no mans land. A metre away the Afghani post. Same questions, same routine, another stamp.

A Toyota mini bus was waiting for passengers. What a relief, what a difference. Luxury. The bus would take them to Jalalabad which was going in the right direction. It was the only road well sealed, smooth, the mountains slowly receding as they headed west. Except the driver was a maniac as they raced past orchard after orchard. Max came to the conclusion that since good Muslims did not drink the man was out of his head. Now and then they saw small fortresses surrounded by high walls and gun towers. An indication of the reality that here the tribes were their own laws. Then semi desert. Rocky emptiness. The sense of adventure palpable.

The orchards reappeared, trees in linear patterns as they entered Jalalabad. A merry market place with open air tea houses and family run restaurants. The air pleasant and no humidity. They saw imported cheeses, fish, pineapples, cans of Danish sausages, imported spaghetti, carrots, tomatoes, all a veritable open supermarket. They sat at a

sidewalk café under a canopy of lush trees ordering kebab with the salad as the meat was freshly grilled. Washed down with Coke. Max then went off to find a cab.

After a while Max arrived in a heavy Russian double radiator six cylinder highly polished remnant from the sixties. With their gear stowed, the fare paid they set off for the last leg of their journey. Comfort and pure bliss. The road constructed to the highest standard. The powerful car handling the terrain with ease. It was surreal. Zooming over hills with no effort Max gave Martin a knowing look. Martin had no idea what Max was on about.

Rosenberg's quest. Ah that. Well?. Well what? What? Max laughed. Martin said what he had thought back in Peshawar. The closer they got the less it seemed to matter. So you don't think...? Max's eyes twinkling. No. The past is the past. It cannot be resurrected. What about bending the laws of physics a little? How? That the ancient gods had been contained and that this tablet when placed over its receptacle might allow these said ancient gods to return. Yeah well, perhaps. But if they were gods...Martin suggested. Max understood. No need for a tablet, unless, it was some sort of beacon which the temple activated. That might be so but still once present on Earth they'd know anyway where this place was. Max didn't fault Martin. He was tempted to agree. But Abysmus and his seals, the ancient Akkadians, Sumerians and their precursors all spoke of enigmatic and powerful entities. Maybe it was drugs Martin half serious. Max laughed then considered the option. That would be some heavy duty shit. Wouldn't it just? Martin's levity infected by Max's indifference. So we humour Rosenberg. Max agreed.

The river valley narrowed. Boulders and rocks everywhere. Massive, the size of small office blocks. The car glid smoothly on. The driver keeping to himself. Not driving like an idiot. The sun setting rapidly. The colours more mauves and ahead a huge dam

with power station. White gushing volumes of water out of a spillway as they twisted and turned up the mountain valley. Half way up the driver stopped kept the engine running and topped up both radiators then they were off. The air cool, the sky a deep dark blue the first stars coming out. A sickle of a silvery moon its light reflected on the lake behind the dam. Eventually they made it over the last pass and saw in the distance a sea of twinkling lights. Kabul.

An amazing place. On the outskirts modern factories, recent office blocks, high rise apartments. Wide streets with little traffic. A modern oasis. Pakistan a veritable time warp entwined in medieval concepts of urban chaos. The Afghans dressed in a mixture of traditional garb and western clothes. The shops well lit not like the futile attempts next door.

Max asked the driver to find them a mid range hotel near the centre or a lodge, it made no difference. The driver smiling for the first time. Probably he would receive a commission for bringing them to some establishment. They settled for a guesthouse in the low key tourist district near the centre. The driver gave them his card and Max thanked him. The man bowed and drove serenely away into the cool night.

Turned chilly. In their rooms they changed into warmer gear. Neither feeling tired, they took a walk along near empty streets, all well lit smelling the aromas from countless restaurants with neon signs. Something definitely missing from where they had come from. They found a western looking restaurant specialising in Schnitzels and potato salads. After weeks of Asian curries this was a delight. They entered and it could have been any place anywhere on the planet. Clean, tidy, tablecloths, excellent service, excellent food, ridiculous prices. Except no beer to their disappointment. So it was coffee instead.

On the way back to their lodge a tipsy local asked them if they wanted some hashish. Max took a quick look around, saw a policeman way up the other end and decided to buy a small amount. The cop probably paid to ignore the transaction. Money for the locals. They meandered back to their separate rooms and Max invited Martin in as he prepared two fat joints claiming this stuff was top quality.

It was.

### **Napier**

Jacko felt the void. The day had been like any other. But the farmstead was different. The emptiness that had taken possession altered. Everything was not as it should be. Even though devoid of the white man. With Gertuk's aid the valley was ready to receive the heroes of the Dreamtime. The Pinja were getting ready out in the distant



hills to celebrate the great return. Their medicine men were still weak having lost much of the way of the land, the life and their ancestors amongst the stars. Jacko ready to facilitate the good deed. The niggling feeling of otherness persistent.

He walked around the now deserted house. An auction sign, bright red and white told of the white man's optimism to continue to dominate the valley. They thought nothing of its ancient history, how the eternal past was once again returning with his contact of the Great Man in the Sky.

He sat on the old veranda. Not feeling quite right. The silence thick, opaque almost liquescent. Everything though looked the same. The yellow parched hills, the silent gum trees, the dry creek bed. Yet he was bothered.

Jim and Susan were dead. Could it be their spirits were still here? Did the white man have a spirit at all? From what he did know of them if they were here they were extremely weak. Nothing like that of the Pinja. Definitely not as potent and certainly nothing like that of Bonelaya.

He rose distracted. A slight breeze stirred the languorous air. It smelt different, a whiff of salt. Bonelaya was coming again. Or his spirit guide was being sent instead. He would have to hurry to the place of the dead necromancer. His eagerness lasted only momentarily to confront what was coming his way. He started to hum to himself, singing quietly to gain the strength to meet Bonelaya on equal terms. Why this spirit man had it in for him he could only guess. And the answer Jacko found was that Bonelaya was jealous that he had gained access to a powerful sky god. He hoped they could still work together.

The house creaked. Probably the beams settling as the sun began its journey into the other world as night approached.

Evening.

The river a mere trickle. Noisy cicadas were chirping away, birds twittering, the rustle of undergrowth as kangaroos came to the slow flowing waters. The difference here to that of the farm unmistakable. Up there was no life. Death had taken possession. The white man's death so different to his people's. Bahloo was all that remained. With Gertuk the only hope for the Pinja. So did Bonelaya want this place to stay as it now was? Full of the white man's death. Why?

Still humming he crossed the placid river and headed for the ancient hill where lay the sleeping ancestor. He would have to travel to the sky and meet Gertuk as Bonelaya suggested. He had to know for certain whether Gertuk was going to keep his promise.

From a secret cavity within the trunk where the spirit of the powerful medicine man slept he extracted the sacred bull roarer. Knowing the breeze was from the north and getting stronger he decided to begin the secret dance. The humming was turning into a potent chant, his feet moving in rhythm to the drone of the bull roarer. As he swung and twirled its resonance increased until all the other sounds of the living land receded into the background, then were gone. The roar was supreme, the landscape a blur, the distant hills, the yellow plains, the darkening sky a kaleidoscope of changing forms. Bonelaya could not come near him. He was surrounded by the sacred spells of his ancestors.

The discordant darkness was easing out the colours of the land. The shades of yellow and green were losing their vibrancy becoming duller as the roar gained in potency. A black mist enveloped Jacko moving with measured steps to his. Finally the mosaic synchronised the vibrancy of the rotating bull roarer energising his spirit.

The mist remained. A mantle of protection with a vague image within. Slowly becoming clearer. A towering citadel loomed in front of him. Palpable, gelatinous pushing itself towards him. He concentrated harder on the roar for he knew if he stopped the impregnated darkness and this looming structure would embrace and swallow him.

This was not the Dreamtime. This land was threatening. Yet he felt its inherent power. Everything was steeped in it, possessed by it. The mountain, the sky, the strange looming edifice reeked of inimical corruption. He searched for Gertuk. A little desperate for he knew he had not much time. They would know of his presence and he felt somehow he was trespassing. The place was wrong and yet this was where Gertuk resided.

A strange flickering light attracted his attention. He had already ceased the bull roarers resonant circumlutions. The light from a tower, its lambency a beacon. Closer to his spirit mind. The opaque light diffusing itself into night. At its apex within the stone enclosure atop this odd looking tower was Gertuk.

The archimage was not aware of Jacko's presence. He too was in trance. The ancient face was calm but what he felt was not. Here was discord coming from Gertuk's spirit. It was not mindless but purposeful. Gertuk was creating chaos somewhere in this uncomfortable realm.

Oriented towards the east. Whether to fathom this spirit and follow it. It was also a chance to confront it whilst it was distracted. The walls he felt had their own spells of protection, repelling him.

With strange writings on the walls, weird drawing on the floor. Gertuk must have sensed his presence for he opened his eyes. His pupils like two black wells receding forever into vast space. His eyes grew larger, expanded into one encompassing black

hole. The silence complete with his enveloping presence. The darkness expanding, rushing towards him and with rapid finality he was within. Buffeted by silent mind raging storms. A whirlwind drawing in the vastness of this nothingness revealing a dark star. For the first time Jacko was frightened. There was nothing like it in the star dwelling spirits he knew. Expanding. What resided there evil.

Trapped. In Gertuk's realm. Sucked clean out of his land. Trying not to panic. The worst one could do in the Dreamtime. Way beyond earth beyond the sky. Lights flickering near the massive dark star. A lilac pulsing orb. Within shapes, convoluted, some serpentine writhing in awful patterns becoming threats. The silence absolute. Despair in this living tomb. Nothingness had never felt this deadly. At the point of dissolution as something tingled at the back of his mind. His head hurt, the harsh darkness moving back, the wind tugging at his soul and a riveting pain shot through his body. Jacko thought he was dead.

His head was splitting. Stars dancing wildly about him. Then merely rocked about and steadied slowly. All was back to normal. Almost. The earth solid beneath him, the chant receding. Chant? The sound of the bull roarer. He rose quickly his head spinning.

There was Bonelaya moving in his own secret dance. His bull roarer slowly coming to rest. The fresh salt air never smelt this good.

Jacko felt dismay, shame even. He knew he had nearly been trapped in Gertuk's realm. Seen the archimage in his lair, fallen into his trap. Bonelaya had rescued him. Jacko owed him.

They looked at each other in silence. Wondering if that was a smirk on Bonelaya's face. The lips twisted in triumph. Jacko standing with some difficulty.

"How is Gertuk?" Bonelaya finally breaking the silence.

Jacko was still recovering from the ebon vision and its inherent threat.

“Or was it Bunjil?” mocking.

“The Great Man in the Sky?” Jacko confused.

“Who else?” testing.

“No. Gertuk.”

“Not Bahloo then.”

“No.” sadness in Jacko’s voice.

“You must do something for your people. I am well aware that the Pinja were once your enemies who had won their battle against the Moon god. And I am well aware that you are the last of the Bahloo medicine men.”

“Helping the Pinja to regain their strength. The ancient battle left behind. The white man is gone. Our spirits can live once more.”

“Through murder?”

“Not so different to what the white man has done.”

“Exactly.” Came the enigmatic reply. “And with Gertuk you will be supreme no doubt.” A hint of cynicism in his voice. He put his bullroarer away. Jacko’s was still on the ground where he had dropped it when the vision had taken possession of his spirit. He merely looked at it. Then retrieved it from the still warm earth and put it in his sacred pouch.

“I knew you were coming.”

“I should hope so.”

“I could smell the sea breeze.”

A dismissive wave of Bonelaya’s hand indicated he was not worried or even concerned with Jacko’s sentient fore knowledge. His spirit lived on the eternal Island of

the Dead. In touch with the spirits of the Bralgu, mighty because they were eternal. They knew the future more than any other Bonelaya included. He had to respect that. But it was not so easy for Jacko. It might upset his plan to dominate the Napier Valley, to allow Bahloo to return with Gertuk's help. Bonelaya threatening to shatter his dream.

Bonelaya was trying to fathom his soul. Jacko felt disoriented, dizzy but the moment was fleeting. Bonelaya was satisfied. He knew what Jack, as Jalnura was up to. Right from their first initial meeting when Bonelaya had warned him to desist from this mad scheme.

"Compared to the white man Gertuk is far more evil. The white man might be greedy, he might have lost his soul, he might be ignorant in the ways of the real world but even that will never compare to what Gertuk will do once he has gained entry." Bonelaya revealed.

"Gertuk lives in Wurk-Kerun."

"You are certain?"

"He is in the Dark Place and like our ancestors have told us there too is the mountain."

"But no Gangomitch."

"No, the spirit guide to Bunjit is not there."

"Then it cannot be the same place."

"I don't know." Jacko said despondently. "It fits what I know of our ancestors Dreamtime."

"I don't think so."

"How?"

“Through you Jacko Jalnura. Through you. You are an open spirit as is everyone to the Bralgu. They know what will pass if you insist on encouraging Gertuk to claim this land for his diseased mind. Gertuk is not human.”

“The spirit ancestors, our culture heroes came from Wurk-Kerun.”

“They did. But Gertuk is beyond even that. Gertuk is no ancestral ghost. But like them he has found a way through the hole in the sky whereby the spirits make contact with us.”

“Well then, if I stop Gertuk I also stop our ancestors from continuing to live with us. To guide us through this life and Tharangalkbek.”

“Gum Tree Country, another home of the eternal dead.”

“It all will be lost Bonelaya.”

“Why? We reach back to the very beginning of the Dreamtime whether Gertuk is there or not. He is simply a strong and evil being and all evil is flawed. You must stop Gertuk.”

“Why don’t you?” Jacko challenged.

“I have not made contact with him. I do not know his spirit like you do.”

Bonelaya knew that Jacko too did not know Gertuk’s spirit. It was his way of saying Jacko had no control over Gertuk. And Jacko knew it.

“Gertuk’s Dreamtime is alive, beyond the stars.”

“Star people can be good or bad. You have chosen bad.”

“Gertuk will win. He is strong. Good and bad are irrelevant. It is power that counts. And I will use this power for the good of the Pinja.”

“And yourself no doubt. To be like Gertuk.”

“What will you do? What will the Bralgu decide?”

“They know of a dark realm beyond the stars. A realm that sucks life out of every living thing. They feed off the souls of everything that lives.”

Jacko remembered the dark star and its magnetic force coming this way.

“I saw the realm beyond his home world.”

“And you did not like what you saw.” Bonelaya prompted.

“It is strong beyond anything that exists in the Dreamtime.”

“Then it will destroy the Dreamtime and it will be nothing to what the white man has done.”

“If Gertuk is an enemy then I can still use his power. Lay a trap. Use him.” Jacko desperately trying to save what Bonelaya was turning into ruins.

“He must be repelled. His world must be destroyed.”

“There are two worlds in which he lives. The one in the land of the spirits and the one where he is. That is far away.”

“Not for long.”

“?”

“While you were possessed by the vision I too saw what you saw. And it was I who broke that spell Jacko.”

“I know now.” Then hesitantly added, “You might be right.”

Bonelaya ignored the compliment. “That is why I am here. To help you. That is why the Bralgu sent me. We must work together and not be enemies.”

“Gertuk is too strong. He cannot be stopped.”

“You are not listening are you? All evil is essentially flawed. Find that flaw and Gertuk can be sent back to his evil world.”



“Then surely we must also destroy that world. The Dark Star beyond the Dreamtime.”

“One thing at a time. Concentrate on Gertuk first. I will help.”

Jacko felt his world collapsing, his dreams being disposed of. Bonelaya knew this. Jacko knew it.

“How?”

“Make him believe all is well.”

“Then what?”

“Summon Bahlloo. He knows the secret of Death.”

“?!”

### **Afghanistan**

“Thanks for the tea kid, but where’s breakfast?” Max asked exasperated. The pale face of the young boy looked at him in vacant bafflement. He placed the tea tray on the only low table in Max’s hotel room, mumbling something to himself.

“What? Can’t hear you.” Max rolled his eyes at Martin who sat on a chair near the window enjoying the scene that threatened to erupt any moment. The boy gathered his wits, approached Max and said in simple monotone: “First you pay.”

“Put it on the tab.”

The boy stood resolutely in front of Max. His pint sized stature of no concern as he squared up to Max, hand outstretched.

“OK. How much?”

“Thirty for two breakfasts.”

Max walked over to the cupboard and rummaging in his wallet handed him the money. The boy nodded curtly.

“And we want it pronto. This is the second time alright?” Max tried to sound belligerent but with him it never worked. When he had gone Max said the place was worse than India. There at least money bought results.

“Have a smoke.” Martin joked.

“That’s just the point. I shouldn’t have to get stoned to get along with these people. We’re paying customers for christ’s sake.”

“Yeah well.”

“Yeah well what?” Max barked back.

“This is Asia.”

“Oh? Becoming a seasoned traveller are we?”

“Max! The kid would probably prefer to be out with his mates instead of being stuck with us.”

“Well that’s their problem. The family own this joint I mean. Too tight to employ someone on starvation wages. Martin when this is over I don’t think I wanna return here again.”

“Oh yeah?” Martin said cheekily. “Bet you said that before.”

“And probably will again.”

“I mean where else can you enjoy a lifestyle like this?”

“Back home for starters.”

“But not for this price I bet.”

“Yeah alright, I know. No wonder the third world is what it is. So do I have to roll a number for you?”

“Preferably before the tea gets cold.”

Max engaged in his labour of love. A knock on the door and the boy entered with a tray of warm flat bread and two large omelettes. He shot a withering glance at Max then left slamming the door behind him.

“See? You upset him. Probably spat on both of them.” Martin laughed cautiously lifting bits of egg to see what’s underneath. Then walked out. When he came back Max was into his food.

“Where’d you go, the can?”

“Nah. Apologised to the kid. I won’t tell you what he thought of you though.”

“Martin. I – don’t – give – a – shit.”

“He’s on his own in the kitchen.”

“Sad.”

“So we going to the post office today?”

“Sure thing. I was going to stay a day or two, see the sights. Up to you.”

“To me?”

“Why not?”

“I could stay a week just doing nothing.”

“That too had occurred to me.”

“Well?”

“Might piss Johann off.”

“He’s the boss.”

“Too right.”

Having finished their breakfasts the boy reappeared.

“Kiddo you must be psychic.”

“Please?” the boy’s attitude had mellowed out somewhat.

“Read mind. Empty plate. You got any Coke here?”

“Coke?”

“Coca Cola.”

“Yes. Eight each.” His hand outstretched. Martin handed him the money.

“Keep the change.” And the boy left in a flash only returning in seconds flat with two lukewarm cans.

“I give up.” Max said as he took the drinks. “And I daren’t ask for ice.”

“You want? Two per glass.”

“No it’s OK. You can run along now.”

The kid picked up the plates and forks and left the room leaving the door open.

“How much for shutting the friggin’ door?” Max shouted after him. Rose and shut it. “Now for that smoke. I think I need it.”

Kabul refreshing after the muggy smeary heat of the Indian sub continent was a relief. Built on a high plateau surrounded by pale brown rocky outcrops. The country as desolate as western Pakistan. The sky crystal blue the odd green tree struggling between buildings in the old part of the city as they walked along its streets.

Mainly Mercs with a few old Fords. Some of the locals in western attire but it was mainly local garb some carrying ornately carved guns. The women completely covered in black, floating amongst the multitude.

The wide avenues narrowed as they approached the General Post Office. The old town crumbling under the open sky hiding some of the primitive clay huts clinging to the sides of the hills. Amongst them high rise hotels sprouting like mushrooms, pristine gleaming white edifices. They circumnavigated a mosque next to the Kabul River a mere trickle filled with refuse. Old Mercedes buses still with European advertising trundled

past along with Soviet Zhils ugly Opels and jet black embassy cars. For a capital it was relaxed, the traffic sparse, the streets wide, the footpaths generous. And not a tree in sight. The noon day gun boomed over the city.

They went to the 'post restante' counter and asked for their mail. The clerk retrieved their large manila folders. Max actually wished him a nice day then retired to an open air restaurant to have a light Afghani lunch. Kebab's and bread, salad and a cold Coke. Their repast finished they wandered back to their hotel.

Once ensconced in their airy bright room with no sight of the kid or his family they studied the contents of their respective files. Rosenberg had drawn a map of Balkh stating they should negotiate a limousine to drive them to Maza-e-Sharif where he was staying at the 'Uzbek Hotel'.

The Soviet Zhil, another heavy six cylinder vehicle with their driver left Kabul with Max and Martin the next day. The first hundred kilometres was easy, driving along the pleasant highway, the lilac white capped mountains steadily drawing closer. The road empty save for the trucks bringing their produce to the capital. Under a turquoise sky the foothills, minor mountains in themselves steadily closed in as they passed the beautiful almost surreal Panjsher Valley. The road deviated west negotiating the narrow Baghlan Gorge then skirted the mountains to the south and west as they headed towards the north west. passing bedouins with their black tents, small mud villages with herds of goats, sheep, camels. The pastures reasonably green. By early evening they came over a rise leaving the mountains behind them, the countryside dry and parched as the plateau of Maza-e-Sharif opened before them. Ahead was the city a verdurous oasis, brimming

green amongst the huddle of brown earthen dwellings, the central mosque a remnant of the passing Moghuls dominating the sky line.

They had little trouble finding the 'Uzbek Hotel' a small almost dilapidated three storey building. The entrance dusty, forlorn. Definitely not a tourist trap. They kept their driver waiting inquiring at the desk for Dr Rosenberg. The tall Uzbek behind the sagging counter handed Max another large envelope after their credentials had been verified. Max left him a tip for his services then returned to the car.

Max opened the manila envelope. Rosenberg had given them instructions to head for the fortress of Shuja south west of the city. It was a major fort which they reached within the hour driving along a well packed dirt road. They paid their driver which included his return trip glad to be stretching their legs.

The fort was typical of the land. High walls set in a square with a high gun and look out tower dominating the area. Aware of their arrival. Shuja's guards escorted them into the courtyard a scene of happy mayhem. Goats, chickens and sheep mingled amongst children and women who all stared at them. To one side near one of the walls a low series of basic huts. The guest quarters. The guard bowed opened the creaking wooden door and lit a hurricane lamp. They dumped their gear then the guards marshalled a young boy to bring them hot flat bread, some goat meat along with a tray of tea. The guard telling them in broken English they were to stay in their hut. Tomorrow they would meet with Shuja as his guests. Max asked after Rosenberg but he merely shrugged then left them to their own devices.

The bed basic. Strung with ropes and no mattress they would have to use their sleeping bags. There were some sheepskin covers. By evening Max soundly asleep after they had finished their repast.

Next morning the sounds of the fort awakened Martin. He heard blacksmiths, carpenters, smelt the kitchen, squawking chickens, the odd crowing rooster all rousing Martin into wakefulness.

A knock on the door and another Afghan entered with Yehensho. They were happy to see each other. Max moaned not too happy to be woken. Having slept fully clothed he peeled off the sheepskin covers, unzipped his sleeping bag and acknowledged Yehensho with a limp wave. Their guard led the three of them into an adjoining room with its wooden shutters closed to keep out the icy breeze coming down from the glaciated Hindu Kush. On a low table surrounded by equally low chairs breakfast awaited them. Scrambled eggs served with fresh hot flat bread washed down with a glass of warm goat's milk. The food welcome in the bracing air. Tea followed.

They finished their meal in silence. Then the door opened and a tall Uzbek, his gown flowing down to his ankles entered. Shuja. They made to rise but with a graceful smile he motioned them to remain seated, inquired after their comfort, actually asking if he could join them in a cup of tea. Bemused Max assented the request. His English was good. His blue eyes sparkling as they spoke in general terms about the weather, the land, their journey. The real reason for their visit was not as yet touched upon. Nor did Shuja mention the whereabouts of Rosenberg.

Shuja's alert face irradiated enthusiasm for their joint project. For him it was a strategic excursion. Informing them he would lead them to the ancient citadel to finish the work with Yehensho of laying the tablet to rest as he put it. For the time being they were his guests and thus under his protection. This was no light promise but something solemn not to be taken lightly. Yehensho mentioned that the Surats had left Varanasi heading this way. Max had no clue who they were. Shuja merely said he had no intention



for them to come anywhere near his fort. Or the ruined citadel. The important thing was the laying of the tablet. Then asked for their opinion.

As Max was senior he stated he was happy for the tablet to be returned to its rightful place. Satisfied Shuja announced that Rosenberg and his Indian friend Praj were camped near the sacred valley in a little known oasis called Elburz. What did Max know of Rosenberg's intentions? What he had just stated. Shuja thought on this remaking that some outsiders had been spotted in the valley. Were they related? Max had no idea.

Shuja seemed at pains wrestling with something which might have unpleasant consequences. Trying not to embarrass his guests. Having come to a decision he informed them that Rosenberg's motives were unclear. Shuja could remove his protection which was not stated as such. More like Rosenberg endangering himself and these other interlopers. Max considered Shuja's intelligence was comprehensive.

Tomorrow with Yehensho and the tablet they would set out for the ancient site. One of the guards who had escorted them to their quarters, now outside was asked to come in. Shuja introduced Akbar a tall muscular Turkman. Along with his companion Muhammed they would be their escort and guides. Contingencies. Max agreed. Shuja's eyes softened momentarily. Satisfied for now.

By lunchtime they were ready to leave. Sturdy horses were provided as the sun hidden behind high cirrus clouds lowered the temperature. With a little fanfare from Shuja, surrounded by his faithful followers they set off west towards the sacred valley. By nightfall as the watery sun sank behind the massive mountains protruding with violent calamity into the grey evening sky they all felt the cold. Akbar and Yehensho enjoyed what they called the fresh air.

That night they made camp within a natural enclave protected from the fierce lashing winds which sprang up out of nowhere, descending with sudden raging bursts upon them. No fire was lit, no cigarettes smoked as the weak sun set behind the silhouetted ranges. Rugging themselves up under piles of sheepskins in their sleeping bags with their escort remarking that this was mild for this time of the year. Akbar took the first turn of guard duty. Martin pondering why he was here at all. He had done no research. Rosenberg presumably had all the notes along with Praj. Max had not invited him just for the company surely. Perplexed he fell asleep. It was too cold to think.

**Katharis – east of Vahnsin**

Shaviscara master of the Black Arts, slept soundly in his lush, extravagantly furnished cavernous cave hidden beneath the mighty towering mountains of the Vindhia Ranges, north of the citadel of Katharis. A suffocating silence languished within the corroded earth of his adobe. At the entrance of his lair stood two monstrous stone giants, grotesque humanoids, their presence the remains of an earlier evolutionary deadlock guarding his baleful retreat.

Soft whispering wings touched his consciousness. His inner mind suddenly fired into life. Focussing upon the intrusion he saw vaguely but moreover felt distinctly the aerial enigmas taking on their material substance. Hovering above he noted the ancient creatures harbouring a cunningly acquired and demonically wrought wisdom. They were certainly the sentient guardians of another magus. Yet they emitted no harmful radiance and although their auras were somewhat threatening it seemed the malignant intentions locked within them had been momentarily curbed. With a detached yet sleeping mind Shaviscara began to fathom these age old survivors, remnants from another time. They certainly did not originate from the south where the partially conquered Dravidians dwelt. To the north were icy deserts and mountainous wastes forming a vast long land of utter desolation. It had to be the west. Though Elburz was contained that only left Ahriman's deceitful servants Merduk the arch priest and the archimage Zohex who had drawn in the conquering armies sent to take Tellurium only to be destroyed as the fabled continent was engulfed by the discordant elements.

Fortified by this knowledge Shaviscara reached psychically out to the hovering beasts trying with subtle dexterity to penetrate Merduk's essence within them. Instead Merduk smiled serenely into his dream.

'What is it you want?' Shaviscara asked at last.

‘For myself nothing. I seek portents rising in the east.’

‘Portents?’ He replied in his dream. ‘Surely not the king’s quest for my daughter Lehena, Queen of Katharis.’

‘No something quite to the contrary.’ Merduk lied and in Shaviscara’s mind a darkening vision began to take shape.

A solar light of immense brightness seared the dark earth unto which descended from the heavenly fireball a writhing hideousness of foul smoke accompanied by searing white fire. Shaviscara saw the citadel of Khasnesh, Moerdrum her shining pagodas and soaring palaces gleaming in thousands of lights reflecting the nocturnal rays of the devouring flames. The majestic buildings crumbled under fierce lightning, flames flashing swept along by roaring tempestuous winds, the raging fire storm smashing down the mighty walls. The fortress collapsed in choking smoking ruins unnaturally aglow under the devastating midnight sun. In horror Shaviscara’s mind froze, his attention now firmly fixed on Merduk.

‘Is this some treachery of yours?’

‘In the east there will arise a threat as dangerous as any prophesied on sunken Tellurium.’ Merduk’s eyes flashed through the beasts.

‘Yes. Tellurium. I remember it well. Defeating the army. Engaging us in battle only to trick us into unleashing the very forces which destroyed that adventure. As the continent sank beneath the cataclysmic waves your spawn had projected onto reality visions of themselves whilst in reality being somewhere else. And so we followed them as the land was destroyed in fire and water. Winds had torn down from the mountains whipping up the roaring waves that came crashing and surging over extirpated cities.

Tricked us to unleash our might against their phantoms, diabolical semblances that did not exist. So where is the danger?’

‘Shaviscara. It is not I who had called forth the dark forces.’ Thinking of Prima’s deep visionaries. How they had abetted the conflict. ‘that was your doing. The act and deed you vomited forth in spiteful revenge. I still serve Ahriman,’ he lied, ‘as you had once. Now instead, being proud and noble you wish to impress Zohex with your might. And your reward? To incur the wrath that plagues our lands by forces beyond our control.’ Back to the DVs. ‘Beware against your own all too human wisdom. The portents foretold and now foreseen by me will come from within your own lands. And therein lies once again the seeds of destruction which threaten us all. Elburz is impotent, the visible enemy lies fallow. Whatever threatens is not yet visible.’

A Flashing white sun appearing in his occult vision. Merduk realising the future was even more horrendous. The coming of a mighty white orb from the future, designed to sear from Vahnsin both Zohex and his citadel if things remained as they were. ‘Beware and be vigilant.’ That should keep him busy. ‘Search your ancient memory, gift of Ahriman and fathom all weaknesses so you may have strength to do battle with me, not against me. Only then will there be a triumph over the hidden enemy.’ Merduk’s voice a solemn threat. Shaviscara’s mind was momentarily paralysed by Merduk’s arresting echoes. All fabrications designed to rattle the presumptuous occultist.

He stared wildly about him. The vision faded, the beasts gone. He recollected only dimly of being within the familiarity of his sumptuous cave. He rose as if burdened by an invisible omen and walked to the raised platform, the sanctum where burned the sacred eternal flame. In front of the goddess Kali. His eyes feasted on her face. A black scoured face in a mien of apocryphic indifference. Her red glaring eyes a sea of sodden

lunacy. He surveyed the vestigial form, this burning desire and wondered why Merduk had been so concerned with this future event. Maybe it was a portent of Ahriman's leading to Merduk's demise instead. The thought pleased him. No doubt Kali would be waiting should Merduk fall through this unnatural potent solar emanation. He too had seen the flash vision flaring momentarily in Merduk's mind.

The fire threw out flickering shadows. Enraptured by the dread black woman he thought he began to glimpse her infernal secrets.

"Kali." He implored. "Protectress of my power, vanquisher of our enemies what is the meaning of this vision?"

Dark sinuous flames curled from the altar throwing night images and macabre inanities about the cavern hurriedly flinging themselves into the dark absorbing nothingness rising about him. He began a chant, his conscious mind sinking into the misty deep within his occultly opened vault of chimeras. He passed the purging fires and entered the all engulfing nothingness. This was the divine abyss that tore to pieces all those unprepared for the great mystical emptiness. There he stopped awaiting from the yawning chasm a sign either from the immemorable past, the potently eternal present or as yet coming from the dimly perceived and still unlit future.

Kali reared herself before him in splendour. A lamiae immersed in riven flames. She was accompanied by the charnel form of Rakshasis, the nocturnal demon recumbent in Kali's wisdom. The serpents slithered around Kali's neck then slowly metamorphosed into the shape and person he knew so well. Young Lethena.

A perverse evil friction arose, a wilful antipathy forcing its inanimate influence between Lethena and the king Dauthus. The latter had fathered many children all of them human in form and weak of mind. But Shaviscara and Lethena knew it was only she who

could guarantee a child inheriting the vast Lunar powers necessary to sustain the kingdom from any occult invasion. Yet Lethena was without issue. Doggedly Shaviscara peered into the turgid darkness of the stillborn and suddenly powerless present.

He saw the leaping fires of sacrifice burn in the royal temple precincts. Here Kali's red robed priests chanted and called upon the great cosmic deities of Varuna and Aswani whilst supplicating the God of Oblivion, Yama. His daughter stood proud, slender, her breasts heaving with emotional anticipation, her pendants twinkling reflecting the rising flames. The king was enchanted by Lethena. She slowly glid in her flowing costly garments onto the black marbled steps of the open courtyard flanked by columns engaven with vibrant spells. Lethena threw herbs and perfumed flowers with a defiant gesture into the holy fires uttering stygian formulae of nocturnal import. A dense suffocating smoke poured forth from the censers as the flames faded, the priests in their red raiment hardly distinguishable so enshrouded was the courtyard by the misty smoke.

Shaviscara fathomed their thoughts. They told his daughter the oracle had revealed not the fiery exudence of Kali but the annihilating power of Yama. The queen would remain infertile. Shaviscara stared at the vision and its indisputable meaning. Lethena would not bring forth the much needed heir either. A simultaneous thought flashed through Lethena's and Shaviscara's minds: Who then will fulfil the prophesy?

The sulphurous smoke began to dissipate as the priestly incantations ended. A radiance emerged from the fading flames still flickering haphazardly in their burnished receptacles. The pungent odours dispersed and there stood Devasi amongst the gathering. The king's only sister dressed in the white garment of a neophyte. She stood silently immersed in an ephemeral light. Shaviscara gasped as Devasi, a girl with white skin and dazzling golden hair just budding into womanhood drew down with her astral soul the

cosmic light of the heavens immersing her in a soft lambency, the light of the midnight sun.

Lethena and Shaviscara thought in unison that Devasi must be sacrificed to Yama to atone for Lethena's bareness. But she was the king's sister under royal patronage which was in effect an absolute decree of eternal protection. Not even the priests could interfere in this grave power play. Any person who did infringe upon this order was sacrificed by royal command and in abominable defilement roasted alive in the fiery arms of Kali. Shaviscara though was equally aware of his powers of manipulation knowing he was able to interfere as he had done before with any royally proclaimed decree of divine providence.

He felt himself able to meet the challenge. With Lethena's aid he would change the pre destined events so balefully foretold.

Trumpets blown from hidden apertures reverberated throughout the black marbled enclosure breaking the spell woven by Kali's priests. The echoes left behind them an exhausted and oppressive silence. Wisps of insipid smoke still wafted around the royal entourage leaving a lingering putrescent corruption. In the dank muteness the priests shuffled slowly down the raised black platform, past sacred fires now a dim flicker in comparison to the bright radiance Devasi exuded. The priests vanished within the giant temple leaving the royal couple and Devasi to themselves. The king had been visibly shaken by the dismal omen. Illustrious Dauthus dreamt of conquest that would stretch from the mountainous wastes of the north to the torpid tropics in the south. Now those dreams lay in precarious jeopardy.

Devasi was trembling not from fear but as always from the fiery omnipotencies which streamed through her young body. These doleful and solemn occasions of her



brother's, of which she knew little and cared even less were to her delusions of a decaying mind. A jumbled play of shadow forms. Meanwhile the ignorant priests entertained him with colourful but empty gestulations, masquerading in front of the Elementals mouthing pretentious and pathetic profanities. And still her brother immersed himself in a puerile debasing form of self aggrandisement. His territorial acquisitions abetted and gained by vamped woven demonic spells had in reality been crafted by the sick mind of the mysterious hermit magician who was to her nothing but a farcical pretender of gelded power. Unfortunately Dauthus fell under Lethena's spell of delusive grandeur. She knew not who was the greater fool and instigator of this clawing morosis: Shaviscara the perpetrator, her brother who craved this unsubstantiated madness or that leeching abhorrent slut Lethena totally befuddling her brother's senses and weakened mind.

At her age of transformation into adulthood Devasi unlike the other neophytes had no ambition to give herself to the noumenal fires, the perennial powers of the Devas, the animated psychic forms of life. What did this perpetual struggle really matter, this intrigue coming from humans bored with their pathetic perception of reality? Shadowed images flitted across her mind as tremulous drums dispersed the last spirits who had not returned to the spheres from whence they had been summoned. She smiled complacently since the fiery Devas, the seedbeds of existence had refused to present themselves at the royal command.

Her poor dilapidated brother so desperately creating stillborn forces for himself and his precious kingdom. In the end all were destined to struggle under a bourn of failure and calamitous psychic destruction. Sorrow crossed her smooth brow for many innocent souls would suffer intolerable anguish and die agonising and tormenting deaths.

For the pretentious Lethena combined with the mania of Shaviscara would only gain in the end their earthly confinement.

The trembling left her as the fires faded amongst the charred embers. Momentarily she felt a rush of fear embrace her. Something was trying to invade her. She shook her head impatiently. Two lackeys were consorting with Dauthus. It was Lethena, her eyes an ocean of purulent anger directed at her. Devasi knew the expression of her mind for it revealed her inmost frustrated obsessions.

Finally without the usual pomp and ceremony the inner sanctum was cleared of the assembled drummers, trumpeters, guards and servants. The smouldering fires that had pronounced an unmistakable doom only aided to embed the vanity of the royal gathering caught in a web of their own demented dreams. What had Lethena conspired with Dauthus during the baneful revelation apart from stoking the flames of unparalleled hatred?

From behind her two mute bodyguards motioned her to join 'The King of All Asia' as her brother would have himself known in this land. She approached the royal dais covered with exotic and extinct skins of animals. Lethena shook with anger, her black eyes narrow, fierce, her dark facial countenance sharp, poisonous and worst of all, seductive. Devasi looked with bemused serenity at them both. The two bodyguards scampered off like frightened rabbits once Dauthus had dismissed them.

"You dear sister," Dauthus said trying to quell his stirred emotions, his mind a turmoil of exasperation, indecision and ennui, "have appeared without command at this sacred ceremony." Devasi looked at the queen whose appearance was like a beast of prey biding its time.

“There was a dark celestial presence here dear brother which was most unusual. Inimical even. So I came. You know the way of the chosen path.”

“Treachery and deceit.” Hissed Lethena. Dauthus held up his brawny hand studded with flashing jewels and rare amulets deemed as protection against his rising paranoia. The viper Lethena cursed her displeasure in perditions syllables whilst watching the cloudy sky with premeditated boredom.

“I request your company at my table tonight sister.” He commanded.

“Brother if you want the Devas as your servants then you should remember better than to order such a request. I will come when I have finished my duties.” She felt a growing pity for him, deluded in his dreams and manipulated by those who knew his weaknesses better than he did himself.

Turning to leave Devasi though continued to address him. “Do you think I had interfered with this charade you call a prophesy? If so then the power you possess is nothing more than some self indulgent stupor. Beware dear brother for I mean you well.” And she descended with her natural poised grace, vanishing into the sanctuary of the cyclopedian temple.

Shaviscara saw the throne on its high platform become curtained in webs of dripping darkness forming sinister shapes around the royal couple, engulfing them in a smothering vice of mental disintegration. Enshrouded thus they sat in the stifling silence. The ebon throne whose dull glimmer of precious stones now lacked any natural lustre was dwarfed by the invasive ghosts of the future. Lethena repeated the death threat against Devasi casting Dauthus into an even greater spiral of drowning paralysis.

“She is my sister and of royal blood.” He bleated meekly. “Protected by the Devas.” He added mournfully. Lethena with her dangerous eyes aglow rose slowly and with serpentine fluidity disappeared from the courtyard.

### **Balkh**

Max did not sleep well as the air grew icier with the coming of dawn. The breeze was slight but biting. The horses were quiet. All was silence. He had been thinking in his sleep or to be more precise, his brain had been rummaging the facts pertaining to Rosenberg’s expedition which had taken an unusual turn. The Afghanis did not trust him. Now why should that be so? Had he stumbled upon latent forces and distant powers trying to channel an ancient struggle onto another dimension, like the present? Max knew

the tablet, never mind the manuscripts was still pertinent. He had to broach the subject with Yehensho, the mystery man from Tibet.

Yehensho was the only person who knew if some accumulation of other worldly forces were forging a link with whatever the tablet contained. Was Rosenberg after something intrinsic to this artefact and would Yehensho aid and abet him. Or in the true Buddhist fashion neutralise whatever it was Rosenberg was after.

To Max this was no idle form of self indulgent speculation. He had learnt in his university days that idle speculation whilst entertaining in itself would often lead to prosaic dead ends. But the conversation last night with Muhammed and Akbar had put a different slant on things.

Being so close to Elburz the two Afghani's joked about the strange tales surrounding this particular area. Here lurked phantoms and jinns ready to haunt intruders. These spectral presences were themselves tied projections of the long dead or slightly mad rulers who had once reigned here eons ago. Questioned by Max they admitted they knew little about the place except what was whispered around the campfires of the wandering bedouins. It was they who claimed that by an elder magic enhanced by enmity and extravated ire, latent occult influences were brought forth by these jinns who had defeated many armies in ancient times. Or so legend had it.

Even now it was rumoured that amongst the hidden clefts of the mountains there were dormant energies which were remnants of their wizardry. The jinns could still resurrect things who would have been dead and buried but had been transmuted into annihilating demons. They came as pale glowing mists which drove men insane, their vapid vapours creeping into the paralysed mind of their intended victims, rending them immobile to act even in their own defence. Or, Muhammed continued the secret places in

these mountains would seek out their enemies as rushing waters would suddenly engulf them sweeping them away. Even avalanches were suspect. At first Max reasoned these stories were a way to alleviate their own superstitious perturbations. But now he was not so sure. The two Afghani's were praying.

The cloudless washed out sky finally stirred Max out of his thoughtful ruminations. Akbar handed him some tough dried meat and a canteen of clear cold water. It was better than nothing. Martin was slowly coming awake.

The pale rising sun returned nature to her more rugged beauty. They packed their gear, made their mounts ready then continued to wend their way south west towards ancient Elburz. Akbar said he had seen faint wisps of smoke coming from the south west pinpointing out Rosenberg's encampment. They followed the precipitous path winding in serpentine whorls down to the next valley below. After a while they stopped behind some huge boulders. Akbar motioned to Muhammed Rosenberg's site.

There were several ways into this jagged depression. It was scenic, a natural cavity. Akbar had no wish to make their presence known. There on the valley floor amongst what looked like piles of rubble was the old ruin. A pile of stones heaped towards the sky. The valley floor looked to Max as if it had once been the site of an ancient temple complex. They demounted and left the animals with Muhammed. Remaining in the shadows they would climb down the mountainside following an ancient track.

Muhammed now gave further instructions. They were going to stay behind. It was to be Max, Yehensho and Martin who were to make contact with Rosenberg's team. They did not trust him or the strangers. Max agreed wrapping his sheepskin coat around him.

Martin merely nodded. As did Yehensho. Whatever they wanted. Their guides were pleased with that.

Huddled in the dark somewhat damp cave the small fire crackled and hissed radiating comforting warmth. The reunion pleasant. Rosenberg thankful for their safe arrival. Johann introduced two reticent Europeans of middle age without elucidating anything further about them. Anna and Kurt. No surnames. A third member unnamed on look out duty. Guarding against horse thieves and fortune hunters infecting the area.

After a light meal of canned stew and coffee Rosenberg informed them of the Russians who had been blown to pieces in a car bomb outside Peshawar airport. Apparently they belonged to a scientific or archaeological expedition who had been on their way here. So Johann surmised. It was for this reason they were now armed. How they had managed that was not explained. Not that Max wanted to know. Martin wary of any firearms. But he kept his peace.

Rosenberg though was concerned with other intervening factors. Worried about the conspiratorial and voracious activities of Surat. He was convinced knowing what Praj, ever the gentleman in the background reckoned that he was after the tablet.

Max added to the volatile mix stating Shuja was not far behind. Then Rosenberg came out with it.

“These people are not what they seem.” His voice persistent. “They know what the tablet is. I believe, as do our partners,” looking at the two Europeans, “that they intend to resurrect a power so inimical to life that it will threaten not just the people here but of the whole area. If not worse. If they gain control of and over the tablet it will pale into insignificance the turgid dreams of Gadaffi or that mad Arab Arafat.”

“Palestinian.” Max mumbled who was stunned, even speechless. Praj watching intently his eyes flashing between Martin and Max. Apparently they all agreed with Rosenberg’s precognitive analysis. Max was glad of Akbar and Muhammed’s invisible presence somewhere out there.

“So what’s the game plan?” Max finally said having recovered from Rosenberg’s almost apocalyptic take.

“Simple. We enter the ancient citadel, replace the tablet, seal it then plant explosives and bury the place forever.”

“But this artefact,” Max stunned at the turn of events, “I mean all this research, I don’t get it.” Neither did Martin. Their presence superfluous. Unless they were being set up. Martin did not like this change of plans.

“No you don’t Max. It was not until Praj explained its strange history, not until certain facts were elucidated that we came to this decision.” Looking into his coffee cup and seeing only dregs.

“Praj?” Max asked.

“Rosenberg is right. This artefact is evil.” As if that settled it.

“Yehensho surely you don’t go along with this.”

Yehensho seemed to come out of his dream world. “What can I do? I had not expected this myself but I am partially responsible. It was me after all who convinced the abbot to release the tablet. However if it is to be buried in its rightful place then I really have no objection.”

“Martin?”

“Me?” Surprised at being asked. Should he tell of his supposition. A delicious thought occurred to him. If it was a mere copy this burial would attract a certain if



dangerous glamour. All over a slab of stone. Let Rosenberg's dramatic finale create its own mythology. Then again, considering, not certain if indeed it was nothing but a copy.

"Yes you. You are part of this too you know."

"I realise that Max. But I am not the team leader."

"So? Doesn't mean you can't have an opinion you know."

"Go on." Rosenberg was calm. The two Europeans more than just spectators.

"I don't think it's evil. But then I don't have the full story behind your research. If Dr Rosenberg thinks it should be buried beneath a pile of rubble then I am sure he has his reasons."

"For god's sake Martin, is that the best you can come up with?"

"Alright." Martin took a deep breath. A little nervous being the momentary centre of attention. "I doubt if the runes mean anything. It may be an alien artefact. What it means is beyond me. What it's potential is, given the other background we covered prior our arrival puts all this in a difficult light. If it is nothing then no harm has been done. If it is a gateway to alien realms who's progenitors are inimical to us as humans then I would concur in burying it. How's that Max?"

"Precisely my view." Rosenberg interjected. "Good on you Martin. An excellent if somewhat intuitive guess."

"It's more than that Dr Rosenberg."

"Oh?"

Martin decided to help create the myth regarding the tablet. "When I studied the tablet back at Swayambhu I noticed some strange indentations on the sides. Subtle but there. At first I thought it might have been ornamental. Or maybe symbolic. But they

could be lock-on devices. Then there were the indentations, the glyphs. Not the sort of characters we assume as being writing. Possibly alien.”

“I agree.” Said Praj. “So you see Max mankind is not ready for this. We are too primitive for it’s reach, its inherent power or the source it is aligned with.”

“I agree.” Martin got in first. “The art work of science fiction has strange glyphs for realism. Create visual dramatics.”

“Go on.” Rosenberg cautious.

“Then I noticed the golden lettering was embossed, etched onto its surface. At the same time another thought struck me. Computers. We have come from the punch card to magnetic tapes and now cassettes. Obviously this is not the end. I’ve got a friend at uni a computer engineer who once showed me its guts. I think it might be some sort of mother or circuit board. A device to activate whatever it is linked to or with.” He had not meant to be that precise but it would not hurt making the artefact more than it was. The ultimate red herring.

“What?” Praj the first to respond.

“That’s what I think.” Nearly laughing on the inside.

“If that is the case, thank you Martin, then all the more reason to bury it.”

Rosenberg concluded.

“Why for god’s sake.” Max exasperated surprising Martin. “This is something great. It should be examined.”

“Remember ‘A for Andromeda’?” Martin asked no one in particular.

They all turned to him.

“It’s about a signal, so think this object, coming to Earth in mathematical code. All goes well at first. By the time the cryptologists deciphered its total contents it was too late. They had been baited. The code a monumental trap. Earth is fucked.”

“Thank you Martin.” Max barely containing his sarcasm. He threw his coffee dregs into the fire.

“Max.” Martin implored. “It’s not up to me obviously. I would personally have the thing analysed.”

“Except,” Rosenberg butted in, “we have knowledge of super energy weapons which created havoc in our ancient history. Praj can vouchsafe that.”

“Yes indeed. Thank you. In our mythology there is a fourth century BC transcript which tells of frightening weaponry being used to destroy our ancient civilisation. It’s called the ‘Yimamika Shastra’. With allusions to weapons of mass destruction in the ‘Ramayana’ and the ‘Mahababharata’.”

“And the Old Testament.” Rosenberg added. “Do you want to risk that Max?”

“Yes!”

“What about Atlantis then?” Rosenberg on the challenge.

“Alright I see your point.” Max deflated. “But does everything have to be so negative?”

“Good point.” Martin agreed. He was ignored.

“We cannot take the risk. Remember we are burying, not destroying it. If at some future point in time it is rediscovered then well and good. But for the moment we think it is too dangerous to fall into anybody’s hands. And we are ready to finish what we have come to do.” Rosenberg walked to the back of the cave and retrieved a torch from his rucksack. He shone it into the murky gloom. Towards the back of the cave was an

assembled array of electronic devices, specialised circuitry, wires, plastic explosives, a mobile launcher of some type and sub machine guns.

“God-All-Fucking-Mighty.” Max exclaimed.

“That is one way of putting it.” Rosenberg was calm. “I love Asia. Amazing what money can buy. The Pakis are good business people.”

A shot reverberated echoing through the valley. Johann and Praj suddenly had revolvers in their hands. Johann ran deftly half crouched out towards the front. Max and Martin were ushered by Praj towards the back of the cave. Then the silence. Shortly a jolly looking chap came marching in with Muhammed as their prisoner. Obviously Akbar had escaped.

Muhammed was pushed into the back of the cave. The assembled weaponry did not seem to worry the others. Anna saying Muhammed made a good hostage. Luckily Muhammed made no sign of recognising either Max, Martin or Yehensho. Rosenberg seemed to have no idea he belonged with Shuja.

Martin was unhappy with the turn of events. They were only a day or two away from Shuja’s fortress. As things were quiet he merely looked at Max then decided to get out. No one stopped him.

Martin heard a scuffle break out in the cave behind him. Muted voices were shouting. Martin distancing himself from the commotion walking in sight amongst the huge boulders and ancient weathered stubby columns strewn across the valley floor. He almost fell over Akbar who quickly put his hand over Martin’s mouth to stop his surprise thus giving Akbar’s location away. Akbar was scouting the cave after the shot had been fired and the third European having captured Muhammed. The horses were still in place. But as Martin and Akbar collided they had engaged in a farcical dance trying to regain

their balance. Dull thuds jerked him as if he was suffering from some sort of spasm. He was. Akbar slumped over Martin with a stifled groan. He had been shot. Straight to the head as well as his body.

In shock Martin dropped the body and hid behind a boulder wondering what to do next. He saw Praj come out of the cave. His white brown eyes huge pierced with a strikingly murderous premeditative iciness. Approaching the barely breathing Akbar he pointed his revolver at Akbar's head and blew his brains out.

Meanwhile a fight must have broken out inside the cave. Martin heard someone yelling, heard the splintering of cases followed by several more shots. An uncomfortable silence descended on the valley. The horses snorted. Suddenly Yehensho appeared from behind and with a rock in hand surprised Praj and thumped him thoroughly on his head, felling him with one blow. He motioned Martin to follow him. They scrambled up the incline, clambering desperately over the rough ground. Reaching the rim they were relatively safe for the moment.

“What about Max?”

“I think he's over there. You see Muhammed made a move for his concealed weapon just after you left. It was the perfect opportunity as that other fellow was busy securing the explosives. Max and I made a run for it. Praj was already gone. Max should be here any minute.” Yehensho explained.

“And Muhammed?”

“I don't know.” A soft whistle had Yehensho wheel around. It was Max, slightly scratched and bruised but otherwise alright.

“I sort of fell out of the cave.” He said sheepishly.

“Man am I glad to see you OK.” As they embraced.

“Steady old chap.” Max laughed. “I tell you Rosenberg and his friends have lost the plot. So as the song goes: ‘we gotta get out of this place, it it’s the last thing we ever do...’

“Alright let’s leave. Yehensho?”

“Agreed.”

He seemed to know where he was going after they had secured the horses. By nightfall Martin was disorientated, cold and miserable. But he consoled himself in that he was safe and with friends. They heard the unmistakable sound of a metallic click as if someone released a safety catch of a rifle. Martin nearly emptied his bowels. Yehensho though merely said, “Shuja.”

They were surrounded by mounted Afghanis. Friends. And followed them as others left for the cave. With the immediate danger over Martin began to feel the bitter cold of night, shivering. What seemed like hours they finally arrived not at the fort but at an underground compound. They heard muted laughter deep within, dismounting. Somewhere flickering flames. Safe. The men greeted their brothers in arms and shook hands with Max, Martin and Yehensho. Lead to another section of the many caves. In one a camp stove being seen to by some women fully covered in the Muslim manner. Watched by one of the men they were given hot flat bread and a mug of tea each. Then they were shown further in where there was a pile of smelly sheepskins. They made their beds for the night.

### Katharis

To Devasi this world, this ever surging energetic playing of forms was to her a series of endless transmutations bursting into continual life. She tried to understand the fantastic apparitions eternally giving birth to so many ultra mundane realities. Realities in which her brother had sunk and enmeshed himself. Today's episode had shaken her complacent and often dreamy self assurance.

Having made up her mind to seek guidance of her protectress Maya she entered with poised grace the sacred chamber of the visionary. Devasi found the wise old woman with her silver hair as radiant as the moon deep in her devotions. A shimmering wisp of light clung to her incubating her from the phenomenal world. Maya she trusted to give her the comfort and devotion of a mother as well as being her psychopomps. Maya in turn was aware, as was the whole kingdom that Devasi was the incarnation of the Devas, fiery manifestations in human form predestined to appear and guide their kind through the monumental changes now racing towards them. Devasi was the vision within the flame, the revealer of destiny and ultimately the usurper of their forsworn enemies.

"My child." Maya whispered smilingly, "I have seen the fires of the temple and beheld the poisonous thoughts of Lethena and the archfiend Shaviscara who hides like a rat in his mountain hole. I am afraid they have designs upon your future. Let us retire within our sacred arts and rid your mind of these useless aberrations. You have far more important things to consider than the machinations of a few tricksters." And lifting her thin sculpted hands she warned her of their infantilism despite being adults.

They walked through the long narrow subterranean levels embedded with magic runes, protection against the stark destroying inanities of mad gods and frantic demons.

In these cool inner spaces Devasi felt recuperative sensations flowing from the back of her mind down her spine warming her young blossoming body.

“Will I be harmed, or die?” Devasi blurted out.

“Remember who you are.” Admonished the old woman with deliberation. “For a person of your stature such questions are meaningless.”

Devasi pulled a face.

“You my dear have been chosen and your destiny is known only to myself and,” she smiled conspiratorially, “what I allow the head priest to vaguely ascertain. Not even he can suspect the role chosen for you by the mighty Devas.”

They reached the narrow entrance to the living quarters which they shared. Muttering a secret spell Maya released the hidden lock of stone. A massive but small door opened silently and the two entered into a comfortable series of rooms. There were a few ornately carven chairs, a low table for their victuals, hollowed out beds sunken into the floor and the sacred hearth of their gods.

“Is it not too early to retire?” Devasi wondering why they were here.

“Practice with me the disciplines you have learnt, the purification by breath, by wind, by warmth and by fire drawn from the eternal four quarters of the universe.” Maya answered instead in leaden tones.

Devasi prepared herself for the purifications and assumed her lotus position. Her mind was shrouded by the stillness of the recumbent retreat. Maya in the meantime prepared the sacred hearth constructed from the finest of stone and placed therein wood cut by the priests in secret ceremonies. Muttering her spells over the fire Maya squatted easily next to the raised hearth, gently blowing onto the small nervous flames as they began to embrace the sacred fuel.



Devasi's smooth white face reflected the passionate red flames surging in ever increasing and mounting energy upwards towards their rightful place, heaven. Moments of immeasurable silence descended broken only by the burning flames and the hissing wood as strange ethereal illusions flickered about them. Devasi felt flushed with the energy radiated by the growing fire. The crackling wood, the sibilant flames were suddenly amongst a mingling of fantastic emanations. The fire became disturbed. An invisible fluid circulated about Devasi and her mind began to feel disoriented as slick, slimy presences became audible. She almost recognised the sound of those subterranean voices. She strained to listen but discerned only sordid slithering sounds. Her fiery passion rose, feeling her precious power and from this three voices she could hear: one babbling whilst two others, the mixture of a man and a woman speaking in unison.

'How' asked the babbling frightened voice, 'can I be the cause of the death of one who has done me no harm?' Crackling laughter and strident flames surged about Devasi then subsided as the strange double voice answered in belaboured tones.

'Let her reign in my place if that is what you wish.' And a poisonous hiss drowned all in a dread sepulchral void. The dual voice continued: 'Her issue will cause you shame and death by her deeds. Die then in shame if such is your will. I will not spend my time with a coward incestuously in love with another sibling. The Devas may be protecting her but I can call upon powers from beyond the spheres, so potent that not even the Devas can resist my cosmic vastness. Do what thou will. I will return in my own right.'

Devasi startled by this awesome duet threatening and disturbing the ether rewoke from her meditations. She discerned the unclean sable form of Lethena talking with her sinister magician brother. The latter had not ventured from his retreat. Beautiful dark eyes

cast at the king's soul unspeakable threats. Her golden pendants vibrating upon her shiny dark neck and well rounded breasts. Dauthus looked lost caught in some cataleptic struggle trying to regain the life of his sister thereby infuriating Lethena and the demonic dreams she shared with Shaviscara.

Lethena slowly slid from his side moving her long legs into such postures as to make her one hoary bestial abortion. Her moving nubile body captivated Dauthus, his dark eyes fearfully exhilarated staring at her delectably soft curvaceous enticements enhanced by the coruscations of her magical pendants. Voluptuously she writhed in front of Devasi's brother who no longer able to restrain the lusts and passions aroused deep within his much abused body joined Lethena in a wild embrace. They lay entangled. Lethena the writhing she serpent gnawing ferociously the neck of Dauthus drawing upon his vital force while he, the fool lay groaning in ecstasy! She moved her dark red mouth away from his neck, slowly down his taut muscular body, her eyes as red as blood while Dauthus now semi conscious looked pleadingly at her.

'Alright,' he moaned, 'Devasi will be destroyed, but do not leave me.' Lethena's caresses reached new heights of frustrating rapture teasing him with her soft round breasts her hands promising the anticipating pleasure of her pornographic body.

'We will offer a sacrifice to the Black Goddess of Fire. Only then will we possess the destiny promised as ours.' She emphasised and her hot lips merged with his panting mouth.

Devasi woke horror stricken that Lethena thought her an enemy and shocked that her brother continually surrendered his manhood to this viper. The fire had died down. Maya her face aglow from the same slumbering warmth which had embraced them both also rewoke. Her face radiated peace and gentleness.

“Are you pleased?” Devasi asked taken aback by Maya’s serene appearance.

“It is as predicted.”

“Then tell me oh Maya, tell me what to do.” Came her impatient reply.

“You know it is forbidden. You have been told so often that if you know your own future than you can reconcile yourself to that future or struggle against it. Either way you only manifest another future altogether. To know your future is to make another. This is not the will of the Devas.” Then adding more kindly, “You will be safe, rest assured. Now you must dress. A journey awaits us and it will be executed with the greatest of secrecy.”

Devasi forgot her gloom and obeyed her faithful surrogate mother. Maya handed her more practical clothing such as a loose tough shirt, warm leather pants, soft leather boots, a leopard’s cape and skull cap to keep out the frosty night air.

“We will leave by enchantment.” Maya explained.

A shimmering red aura appeared around them both. Devasi felt the tingle of energy signalling the Devas response to Maya’s invocative prayer. The sacred flames flickered in rapid succession about them. They took on a vibrant essence metamorphosing into a jewel encrusted radiance, receding slowly amongst an engulfing darkness. The lights became the distant and static fires of the stars.

They found themselves in a forest submerged in night. They stood under massive trees emerging from the soil in upward clawing arches. The ghostlike flames had been dissipated. Devasi shone like the resplendent moon. The air was crisp and icy, pierced by cries of strange birds hidden in the entwining canopy above. This verdurous forest oozed mystery. They smiled at each other and Devasi ran towards Maya and embraced her heartily, crying a little for the deep love they both shared.

“How did you manage that?” Devasi asked excitedly overcoming her tears.

“Through you, through the power of the Sacred Flame and the Devas who accomplished this task Devasi. I was merely a helping hand in their design. The Devas you see had caused a passion to stir in both Lethena and the king. It was of such intensity that they both forgot their vile hatred of you and passed the night in pleasant debauchery. None know as yet of your disappearance from the temple.”

“Are we finally out of Shaviscara’s reach?”

“It is impossible to be out of the wizard’s reach even if we ventured beyond the kingdom. His power is wherever the phenomenal world is.”

They moved through the thick undergrowth, over toppled tree trunks, their steps muffled, hushed by the silence of the night. Entering a clearing they came across a small marble structure containing no windows and only one sealed entrance. It looked like a mausoleum. Sitting upon a spread of animal skins, clothed in linen of royal purple a venerable old man met their gaze. Devasi and Maya stopped. His hair was white, his skin almost transparent and he smiled at them.

“You have come.” He said softly. “Please make yourselves comfortable.”

Approaching the sage in deep reverence they sat upon the hides covering the soft spongy grass.

“Devasi,” He began after some silent thoughts, “welcome Maya.” He smiled at her. “It has been a long time.” Turning to Devasi he continued, “Guided by your and my gods you have entered our small realm where we seek the ways of heaven. Both Maya and myself are the eyes and ears of our gods on earth. Here we complete their will. As you know the power of Ahriman, being the power of Death expands constantly, spreading its infamous torrent of mad desire, of shedding sacred blood and perpetuating

the most vile of crimes. The Devas have chosen you to deliver us from this evil. It will not be through your womb that deliverance will come. Your power is far more artful than that. Your destiny is final and so you are protected against an enemy which creeps in continually widening ripples, unleashing a frightful destruction over this land. You have the Devas divine fiery shield. Zohex and Shaviscara will be destroyed. We cannot allow them to unite their forces for even one singular moment. We must strike against them. The people must be stirred into action. When the archfiends have been banished and the evil they have created vanquished will Ahriman devour himself through his perennially burning malignancy.”

### **Moscow**

Colonel Dubrov freshly returned from his meeting with the countess at Sassnitz was in for an unpleasant surprise upon his return. He had in front of him received by military telex the news, coming via agents in Islamabad of his team’s assassination in Peshawar. Preliminary investigation revealed the explosives used originated in Baluchistan. The attack had not been instigated by Pakistan’s shadowy ISI who claimed they had no idea of the Soviet’s presence until the fatal attack. Or of they did know they

were not saying so. It was a minor point. A check of flight records revealed that at Peshawar a certain Surat from Varanasi had flown in on the same flight from Delhi. A connection was possible especially when coupled with other decoded information which revealed Surat was seen at Maza-e-Sharif. He had arrived there by bus accompanied by his wife.

So, Dubrov calculated, others were snooping around the area where Vladimir Bogden had been assassinated. Local agents checked Surat's luggage and discovered some notes indicating that he was heading for the same area as Bogden. South of Boyni Qara. More importantly amongst his contents they found a book bought from Abu Jahal's bookshop in New Delhi.

He ran a check on his terminal and discovered Jahal to be a low key agent. Dubrov sent at once an encrypted message to their embassy in New Delhi to see if this agent might not be connected in some way to the disparate and disturbing information Dubrov was in possession of.

Forty eight hours later Dubrov's inquiries both in central Asia and here at home were beginning to net results. In Moscow the police sealed off under the auspices of the KGB Semenov's flat. His distraught wife was with family somewhere in the Ukraine. Questioned she only could elucidate upon Semenov's theory pertaining to the unique location of the ancient temple in northern Afghanistan. Dubrov was aware that Semenov had been debriefed on the outskirts of Moscow at a secret location regarding operation 'Black Magic'. So someone felt threatened taking his outlandish theory seriously enough. To think there might be some truth to all of this puzzled him.

News from New Delhi matched his suspicions. A check had been made of the bookshop which his agents found securely locked up and looking very deserted. Nobody

in the building knew where the occupants were. Rifling the premises they discovered Jahal had few, if any worthwhile business transactions except for a substantial amount of money passing between New Delhi, Moscow and what did not really surprise him, Peshawar. Dubrov with little difficulty pieced together the information in his possession.

Abu Jahal was part of a minor network of theirs, gathering information on central and western Asia. Unfortunately it had been established by his own directorate and up to now had not been important enough to bring to the attention of Androponov. With his offsider Jamin they had been kept informed from time to time of the precarious and often mercurial situation in Afghanistan and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. It became clear now that Jahal was a double agent. It had been far too easy for his people and Semenov to have been eliminated so quickly and efficiently. They had in fact killed two birds with one stone. With hindsight their move made sense. Peshawar was a frontier city and the gateway to Afghanistan.

As for Konstantin's notes they were simply of a speculative nature. He continually referred to temples as powerhouses interconnecting electromagnetic, astrophysical and psychological forces within the human mind. He searched his memory staring into the bleak Moscow sky. The countess and Rosenberg were on the same trail. He thought of these people as slightly crazy but someone down there was of an altogether different opinion. Well it was obvious the Afghanis were hiding something. He smiled. The fiasco was turning into a break for him.

The next day, having collated the material into a workable extract Dubrov decided to go straight to the top and see Androponov. The latter peered through his gold rimmed glasses at the colonel's preliminary analysis. He agreed verbally with Dubrov's evaluation. Either way Afghanistan was trouble. Androponov concurred with Dubrov's

suggestion of another mission but this time making sure total discretion was assumed for this assignment. Dubrov understood. He reassured his boss he had two excellent agents who would be suitable for the mission he had in mind.

Varlam Serov sat in front of Dubrov. A tall lean dark man of Muslim background his family hailed from Soviet Uzbekistan, a republic bordering Afghanistan. Its ethnic people spilling over the border. Serov in his early forties was one of Dubrov's best field agents. He had been of invaluable help during the Philippine crisis of January two years ago. Liaising with Colonel Gadaffi, Serov had been able to establish a Muslim ceasefire in the southern Philippines where they were fighting for independence under the banner of the Moro National Liberation Front. Shortly after the MNFL arrived in Moscow to barter with Gadaffi's oil for weapons. But détente was in the air and Moscow's plans shifted to blend the various factions into a non aligned block rather than allow the freedom fighters to indulge in their inter-cine wars. The idea was to promote peace, to gather into one loosely aligned but anti American force the many different groups in the area and split the western allies of the region one by one. The days of Stalinist confrontation were over. Serov had played his role at that critical juncture extremely well.

"What do you know of Afghanistan?" Dubrov asked Serov.

"That Daoud was ousted with the help of their armed forces." He replied with ease, his tanned face unaffected by any emotional whims or intellectual prejudices. "The skirmish was well contained. We lost three MIGs and a few tanks, mainly 54s and 55s. The people I remember treated the affair as their liberation which had been our very intention. The flowers strewn in front of the tanks were genuine signs of affection



towards the coup. With our homework done we managed to persuade the deputy Prime Minister, Haf Izzullah to unite the squabbling Khala and Parcham factions. Afterwards Izzullah made an official statement declaring our non intervention in this internal settlement of theirs. The Soviet Union he declared were selfless friends allowing his country to pursue its own peaceful policy of non alignment. And so another prospective ally had been safely deflected from the American sphere of influence. Pakistan and Iran recognised the new government, a crucial victory for us.”

Dubrov listened patiently knowing what the Soviets had achieved was a perfect textbook infiltration and usurpation of a western oriented country. The Socialist spirit was alive and well.

“Yes. I see you are well informed. Our expert on Muslim relations is in fine form. You may be aware,” Dubrov frowned, “that one of our scientists was murdered in Peshawar.”

“And our operatives.” Serov added dispassionately. “News like this gets around, secret telexes or not. But I do not think this had been staged by the Pakistanis, not in the present climate, central Asia being what it is. Nor was it any Iranian hotheads wishing to provoke foreign intervention or internal revolution. They need all the friends they can get. Maybe the Americans want to destabilise Pakistan so as to increase their military aid in the area.”

“You think it might be one of Richard Helmut’s little ideas? It had occurred to us. No what we have here is rather different and rests upon several oddly related connections. One ends in New Delhi, one in Peshawar, one in Baluchistan and one possibly at Boyni Qara in northern Afghanistan. We believe the people who arranged this little incident had plotted the murder in Peshawar. But Peshawar would only be one of

their centres of operation. It would not surprise me if these people were Afghanis working out of India and Pakistan.”

“A fifth column? I am beginning to see a little of your drift comrade colonel.” Serov said lighting one of his strong Balkan cigarettes. Dubrov declined the offer. “May I ask where I fit into all of this?”

“You may.” Dubrov continued in a leisurely manner. “There is no point in sending you to Kabul as part of a cultural exchange program, studying the restoration of mosques or some such nonsense. Instead you and another agent will be dropped into northern Afghanistan, around Balkh to be precise.”

Dubrov rose and moved behind his desk and pulled down a wall map of the country.

“You see where Semenov was heading? He had his own reasons for visiting the area and we thought it an excellent idea to use this as a cover to scout out the terrain. But somebody panicked and by the very fact that Semenov and our operatives were blown sky high before they even reached their destination indicates to us there is something going on down south. That is where you come in.” Dubrov returned to his desk his immaculate uniform perfectly filled by his tough solid body. Operating a side cabinet he poured two generous glasses of good vodka and handed one to Serov. They drank.

“And you want me to find out what it is that makes them so nervous? But what about local surveillance. Surely it is easier, less costly and less obvious. Or simply send in the Afghan army.” Serov suggested.

Dubrov burst out laughing.

“My dear comrade,” He said hardly containing himself, “If you weren’t so intelligent I would not know what to say to you. When the Afghan army does decide to

do anything everybody knows what they intend to do long before the event. You know yourself when they attack half of them shoot over the heads of their rebel friends whilst the other half melt into the night with their weapons. But come around here and let me show you something.”

On Dubrov’s desk were several satellite photographs of mountains. Pointing to a rising mound on which were scattered several mud buildings centred within a compound Serov recognised at once a local fort. There were hundreds of them scattered throughout the land.

“This,” he indicated on the pertinent photograph, “is near Boyni Qara. It is the most substantial fort in the whole area. Since the assassination of our people a lot of movement and activity has occurred here thanks to heat imaging telemetry. Mainly movements of pack animals. Now their leader Shuja-un-din-Ghuri has, by strange coincidence a small mansion in Peshawar. I know he is implicated, rest assured. Further south west,” and his thick finger followed a series of jagged crests, crevices and rugged peaks, “here, are some ancient ruins. We think in these very ruins we sighted more pack animals. We know this is the place Semenov was interested in and Bodgen executed. This may just be their real headquarters. We must discover what it is they wish to protect there. If it is merely for them a local operation then you need not take any further action. But if it is something else, something unusual contact us and await further orders. We will of course provide the necessary back up facilities at our disposal. Luckily you won’t be in real enemy territory. Afghanistan is on our orbit now, except for a few belligerent tribes. Find out what you can.”

“Is the regime having any difficulties with the rebels in this particular area?”

Serov asked helping himself to another vodka. Dubrov shrugged his shoulders and handed Serov his dossier.

“You will leave this with the flight commander when you change over at the border. There is a plane waiting for you this very moment. You are ready of course.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Your partner will rendezvous with you along the way. She has been fully briefed. She knows the area since she has trained there. So she will be prepared. Something to appreciate.” Dubrov allowed himself a smile. He poured two more glasses which Serov welcomed.

“Now, at Murky you will transfer to a special flight remembering to leave you dossier with the senior officer. The flight will take you south of Balkh. Remember the southern section of the area, specifically the ruins are of primary concern to us. Don’t bother with the main fort. Keep away. We know enough about it. Watch the rebels carefully and see what it is they are doing or hiding there. What makes this so imperative for them to wipe out one of our most respective scientists and run the risk of throwing punches at us. Now as you speak the local dialect you should be safe enough. Let us drink to your success.”

He repoured to more generous slugs.

“To mother Russia.” Downing the vodka.

Serov was driven to the military airfield at Uzkoje. Boarding the waiting transport they left Moscow in the frigid lush of approaching autumn. The plane was crammed with electronic gear. The flight one of the many surveillance missions gathering information

along the troubled border with Iran. They flew almost directly south to Astrakhan then on to Baku on the Caspian Sea.

Serov fingered his sealed instructions. He was at the rear of the plane, out of the way of the operatives manning their stations. The plane droned endlessly and monotonously onward, its engines pushing eastwards over ancient Turkmenistan following the old trade routes over the Karakumy Desert. The last reflecting rays of the sun on the Caspian Sea turned slowly from a bluish haze into a vibrant purple. With the coming of night he drank coffee intermittently followed by hot borsch served from a portable canteen. It was lukewarm by the time he received the red slushy soup. There was no sour cream. With the last rays of the setting sun he saw the night blue ice of the frosted mountains approaching rapidly.

Hours later the heavy plane began its descent into the inky blackness. Even Murky was obscured by darkness. Bouncing slightly upon the tarmac, engines revving at full reverse thrust the thundering plane shuddered to an abrupt halt. Unstrapping himself from the canvas seat Serov felt the miserable cold which he bore stoically since leaving Moscow.

A young golden haired pilot took his now digested dossier and politely escorted him off the plane asking if he had had an enjoyable flight. It was a joke. Serov ignored the cynical remark too intent upon upcoming events. The plane revved its engines and lights flashing churned down the runway drifting noisily back into the night.

He looked around and saw a flashlight blinking at him from a squat dark corpulent shadowy shape. It was an old Sikorsky helicopter which was to take them into Afghanistan. The military markings had been partially disfigured, recognisable but not identifiable. He heaved himself into the lower hold as a detached hand aided him into the

cargo hold. The rotor blades whined into action. The machine gave a shudder and with a slight lurch they were off.

“Come on up.” A feminine voice shouted. “Welcome. My name is Yelene Sukharov, lieutenant colonel of the 5<sup>th</sup> signalling corps. Yelena will do. Welcome to the Hindu Kush Express.” She smiled sweetly, the dim control lights outlining her feline face. With her short blond hair he calculated she would be just on thirty.

“I think,” Serov began, trying to make himself reasonably comfortable at the back of the cabin, “you have a few things to tell me.” Cramped between odds and ends she told him of their plan just to make sure.

They checked their gear, their backpacks with its chutes, small arms, climbing assault gear, infra red detectors and other survival equipment. Her rich melodious voice overrode the drone and swoosh of the engine and the blades. As they approached the border and its looming mountains Afghan air control was alerted of a ‘breach’ further west where the Soviet air force was intruding ‘accidentally’ into Afghan air space. Things could not have been arranged any better. He noticed the moon. Yelena smiled saying it was setting and by the time they were ready for the drop the sky would be an impenetrable darkness. Their mission she assured him would not fail.

He liked her. She was a mountaineer and had handled some hairy tasks before. She showed him the photographs once more. He nodded, she tore them up and put them in a special bag reiterating the ruins they were making for could be a secondary look out of the rebels. They were going to insert themselves in the next valley probably a day’s hike away from their designated target. The last satellite scan and surveillance flight had shown no particular signs of activity around their area of operations. By morning they ought to be safely camouflaged having reached their sanctuary.

He asked her how she could be so certain of their schedule in such uncertain terrain. Her charming smile said it all. She had been there before by only some months. Serov raised an eyebrow and decided the mission would be a complete success and an enjoyable one at that. Yelena claimed she could kill and disembowel goats, sheep, anything edible or inedible, something she had learnt when serving her country in south west Asia.

Then Yelena brought up what he had not considered. The rebels might not be plotting anything on a grand scale, or even politically subversive. Like the troubled times of the thirties in central Asia they might be aiming their wrath not at themselves but the Soviet Union. She reminded him of the importance of Termez, the military satellite transmission base. He became even more impressed with this versatile young urbane lady. Serov told her he would take a cat nap and promptly drifted off into a deep sleep.

They made their jump well before midnight descending into the icy void somewhere south of Boyni Qara. Pulling their ripcords their bodies jerked upwards as the dark canvas unfolded, drifting into the nothingness below. She calculated if everything was right there would be no breeze to blow them off course. That they should make their destination within a few hours at most. Landing in a valley chosen well before they buried the parachutes and began the arduous trek northwards following a stream they climbed crested ridges, gaining ground fast.

As morning approached the temperature dropped well below zero. They were fortunate in that no icy winds descended from the surrounding glaciers. In any case the continual walk kept them reasonably warm. At last they crawled cautiously over the last

ridge. Positioning themselves out of sight they took out their field glasses and surveyed the sunken valley below.

Towards their left they saw the opening of a cave, a good place to make camp. The valley floor looked level, exposed but easily traversed and giving some cover for it was littered with the collapsed rubble of ancient ruins.

“This has got to be the place. We are in luck.” Yelena whispered. Serov merely nodded.

Retrieving their small infra red scanners they detected nothing. But then again these miniscule gadgets were not the best in range and quality. They decided Serov was to climb down into the valley first, Yelena covering him. He was to approach the cave from the front whilst she would come in on the cave from above. He took out his gun, assembled it, checked his anti personnel grenades and made his way down the rocky incline. Yelena watched, then satisfied he was clear skirted to the left keeping Serov in sight whilst watching the cave intently.

It was not until he had come half way across the boulder strewn valley floor that a bullet whistled over his head. Surprised but instantly alert he quickly went to ground. Another shot rang out, the bullet whistling past him, ricocheting behind him. Without moving his head his eyes scanned for Yelena. She had vanished. Good.

A voice shouted something in Urdu, uncommon here but a tongue he could follow. He was to give himself up. So only he had been spotted. These people then were not locals, the accent was too stilted, too guttural. Maybe they thought he was an intruder come to steal their belongings and whatever else they had of value. After receiving no reply from Serov they tried English.



Instead Serov put his pistol away and with some difficulty attached the grenade launcher to his rifle. He took out three grenades as another hail of bullets sprayed around him. His portable grenade launcher was ready. They were using light automatics and it appeared there was only one doing the firing. With his little infra red scope he checked to see if they had a covering post but detected none. It was a weak, desperate and surprised defence, probably over confident, hopefully amateurish. Checking his equipment Serov made himself as comfortable as possible lying on the edge of the rise, legs apart, placing the rifle on its telescoping tripod and carefully taking his time set his aim. Through the scope he saw the tinged blur of someone to one side of the cave's entrance. The horses to the right snorted, a little skittish. And a dull shape a little into the cave. Above the sky was beginning to turn into steely grey.

They were guessing as to his whereabouts for they fired in wide angled bursts. He decided to wait a little longer. He had the cave well in sight but paused allowing Yelena to get closer. No breeze stirred. It would make for accurate shooting. At this short distance he ought to land the grenade into the cave without any trouble. The hill was smooth so when Yelena descended she would not be accompanied by an avalanche of small rocks announcing her arrival. Another hail of bullets burst randomly around him. They had lost him totally. A pity he had to neutralise whoever it was that wanted him dead. Not the best way to begin a mission.

So far neither he nor Yelena had fired a shot. This should make them nervous. Their firing was less intense, more sporadic and even more widely dispersed. It was the classic pattern of covering ground fire but they had already lost. The sky was turning into a washed out grey, not enough light to create any shadows just yet. It was now or never.

He scanned the area once more then lined up his sights and focussing on the centre of the cave pulled the trigger. A sharp crack echoed in his ears. Quickly he loaded another grenade. Two's better than one. He saw the first grenade trail off away from him in a neat trajectory landing inside the cave with a puff of dust followed by a dull thud. A cloud of smoke and dirt now obscured the entrance. The next shot saw the grenade follow the first. This time there was a violent explosion as he saw an orange flash behind the raised curtain of dust and smoke. Several more explosions followed and agonising screams. Then the fireworks, live ammunition going off in all directions. Unless the cave had any protective cavities whoever was in there had by now their ears and lungs ruptured, if in fact they were still alive. All he heard was a tortured wail and more importantly no returning fire. But even that could be a trap for he had trouble finding their muzzled flashes.

Above the cave he could see Yelena ready for her descent. Ropes in place. He waived for her to wait. Smoke poured furiously from the cave. He raced forwards, down the incline, zig zagging between the strewn boulders advancing towards the enemy. Yelena timed her descent and they both hit the entrance of the cave simultaneously.

A bloodied corpse its face half blown away stared with one glazed eye at them. A westerner. A sickening gurgling sound came from the back of the acrid smoke filled still morning air. Yelena was covered by Serov as she detached her ropes.

“What a mess.” Moving carefully forwards he saw another thicker man lying in a twisted angle, eyes twitching, blood pouring from his mouth, nose and ears. His lungs had been blown, the man dead. Serov got out his small flashlight and shot the beam into the murky interior. To one side was some miniature electronic equipment, circuitry, wires and a simple single frequency transmitter. He noted its setting. Half the cave had been

blown in. They must have had explosives here to cause such a detonation. There were more scattered pieces of torn, bloodied human body parts.

“Pity about this.” As he shone the torch over the mess. He saw a woman’s severed head, mouth agape, staring blue eyes. At another amongst the rubble. A pair of legs were protruding. Dark brown, too dark to belong to an Afghani. He eyed Yelena who surveyed the carnage around her. Turning around and running back to the entrance. Nothing.

“I’d say we have an hour at most to see what gives.” She said.

“Right.”

They began a quick and systematic search. The transmitter was useless though other evidence indicated they had intended on some sort of sabotage. But what? The rebel camp? Since there were no Afghani’s around this little visit must have been as clandestine as their own.

He checked the body parts for papers, identity of clothing, make of shoes while Yelena went through the junked equipment. Not the most advanced but once serviceable and useful if limited. This outfit had been well supplied but not by them or any of their allies. Serov found a tattered map of a temple complex or citadel. It was not drawn to scale but it was exact enough and several pages worth. Each page covered a specific level. It indicated the placement of the explosives. So that was it. They were saboteurs. Which solved nothing. It only deepened the mystery of their presence. Why would a bunch of Europeans, plus one possible Indian want to blow up an ancient temple? He called Yelena over showing her the diagram.

“Given their mission was an act of sabotage do you think they were our own people?” he asked. She was as puzzled as he was.

“No. We would have been briefed.”

“Well, we can’t stay here long. This commotion is sure to bring in some of the local people, the one’s were supposed to keep an eye on. It’s funny you know,” poking with his boot at a piece of human shredded meat covered by tuffs of clothing, “we have actually saved the locals from some foreign mercenaries.”

Yelena nodded in agreement.

“If only they had not opened fire. We might have been able to work with them instead, then dispose of them.”

“I suggest we check out this place though,” Yelena looking around, “meaning the valley. Then come night camp out in the open. After that check out the fortress at night. We head north east judging by our position and the coordinates of the map.”

“Agreed. Got everything you want?” he asked. They were satisfied.

It was then they heard the stifled breathing further back behind a collapsed rock fall. Yelena, knife ready crept stealthily towards the stertorous sounds and discovered a dusty semi conscious westerner. He legs had been completely smashed. Yelena was soothing him, letting him have some water from her canteen. Even though incoherent he told her an amazing story. When he had finished she shot him right between the eyes.

Abbot Vajrasana's body jolted with an electric spasm as he was meditating before retiring for the night in his little cell. His mind had gone blank. Momentarily vanished into the void that was coming towards him if not this planet. Just like the previous vision. Something from deep within space. Outer space. He unfolded his legs from the assumed lotus position and rose a little difficulty. He was not getting any younger that was certain.

The blackness in his retreat unmistakable. This non vision homing in on him. Disturbing revelations of discordant realities embedded within this effluence. Not just the subjective rambling or fanciful imaginings of his idle mind. This darkness was becoming persistent. An effluvium heralding an advance of a force more than just other worldly but from deep within distant space.

Vajrasana was becoming convinced that this darkness had within it a strange force of life, expanding this way as a field of force. Alien, foreign, utterly archaic, a possible event horizon as the physicists would say. If anything he reasoned as he stared out over the dark valley outside this could even be a time interface of an invasion from its strange distant origin.

He pulled his robe tightly about him for the chill of the night was severe. He had no problem with the existence of parallel worlds. The mandala realms were testimony itself. Nor might this ingress be fortuitous. What worried him was the fact that this incursion was possibly contrived by as yet undetectable sentient forces which by their own manipulation of both space and time were contriving to advance into time itself. If so, with that dissolution they could control the dimensionally multiple interfaces of space. If only Bahnum Randa would make contact or better still return to this world. Then he would know more. What to do.

What concerned the abbot was the suspicion that this lurking alien field had not only made contact with this planet but that the first signs of its manipulative powers were starting to distort the envelope of life encompassing this planet. These dark beings were beginning to release their time forming, space warping reality onto this one.

Within their dark vastness eternity was but a shadowy cyclopedian vastness. Smoothing the way to create conditions conducive to their bizarre existence. And with this contact, ancient dormant powers positioned by secret intelligences long dead were now threatening to reawake and possibly plunge Earth into an age of darkness glimpsed mainly in remnant mythologies.

Staring into the murky depths below, the soft night breeze wafting around the monastery a thought struck Vajrasana with pellucid clarity. Tibetan magicians, the Bon priests and later Buddhist lamas had taught that alien and oblique tangents of existence could be mastered by becoming aware of that very condition they were embedded in. And happening it was. How many others knew or were aware of what was transgressing space he wondered. Knowing true reality the only way to come to grips with this event. Teachers had always told their pupils in Tibet to project those forces into the visible world of form. Exercises with concrete samsaric images so that they became at one with the practitioner to study the universal law of decay. So to defeat this ingress it seemed necessary to allow it to self manifest. Then to deal with it.

Vajrasana was in a quandary. The invasive forces needed an opening to create their own time fielded consciousness. They would need this configured space to reconfigure space and so channel their excrementitious energy and thus usurp the current reality as it was. It could change the mind maybe even evolution itself. A foreign nemesis for those who would not realign their consciousness to this invasive force field. Vajrasana

sighed. Maybe it was time to fathom the mandala without entering as had the renegade rinpoche. He returned to his pallet and decided to sleep on it.

### **Vahnsin**

Trees rushed past, meadows slid by beneath the beating hooves as Bahnum rode onward into the night. The morbid vision at the heinous citadel was still haunting him.

Zohex had drawn on and tamed the powers of darkness, potent enough to paralyse the will of the living. Zohex was not natural or human. Bahnum knew enough of demons to remember they could incarnate. Convinced Zohex was one such entity. Unearthly. With frightening delusions impregnating the souls of even those who were still free an awful resignation leached the remaining leaders. Kathan, Sarum and other elders held back from these depreciating events under a thralldom of fear. Whilst Zohex's pestilential death poured forth over the realm unchecked.

Bahnum remembered how whole tribes had stood in that dreadful courtyard. Mouths agape, riveted to the ground by Zohes's inane theatrics. No one seemed to question the reason for his arrival, his presence or the death of Mudhan. Though hope was present with the enigmatic sages at Elburz Bahnum informed the elders to continue to unearth the origins of this horrific evil. They had given him provisions and a horse, prayed for his safe journey into the unknown and so he left them on the open plains to seek destiny.

Now his mind was fraught with contradictory emotions. No realm in the shamanistic universe had ever felt this real, this continuous. Yet he was still alive and with that appraisal his courage returned burning like a raging fire to rid this realm of the madness threatening to engulf them all.

He felt neither sun nor wind, noticed neither moon nor stars. He rode steadily on not wishing to needlessly abuse his charger. Bahnum slept in the saddle indifferent to his destination. Fate, signs and omens would be his guide now. The power of Elburz was supposedly guiding him.

The Elders had proclaimed the coming of a Solar Race of Sentient Intelligences who would finally wipe out Zohex and the archpriest Merduk. Instead Bahnum witnessed



the heralding of a dark apostate world. Its people sinking in their futile attempt to gain their rightful freedom from tyranny. Bahnum saw no hope in their struggle against Zohex's spectral forces who took brutal delight disposing of their victims lives.

As the night air became crisp and cold Bahnum wondered if he ought to return to Sumtek if that was possible without the aid of the mandala. The past was the past. Vajrasana had said that if the evil was expunged then the future was guaranteed to be a happy one. Bahnum pondered if any of this was beginning to matter. Zohex and Merduk were supreme but given time they too would join the dust of the universe. At the same time he could not bear to see this vast land tormented by bloodthirsty hordes encouraged by Zohex to rampage with homicidal intent across the land. He could bear no longer their tame and almost nauseous compliance to this state of affairs. And if he withdrew he would be just like them even though they were deep down good people. He almost cursed their benevolence, their forgiveness, their innate goodness. Yet the despair in their souls was heart wrenching. It made the current dictators of the world he left behind almost enlightened benevolence itself. With heavy heart weighed down with mournful hope he was determined again to try and release these people from the dark bourn of Vahnsin. He nodded off.

Tormenting visions unusual for a Bombo flew through his consciousness despite his troubled respite. Enigmatic shapes left a sick hue hovering at the brink of his disturbed mind. Forms of nebulous things crawled forth, emissaries from the citadel of death. Amongst these distasteful objects a vague otherness vacillated merging with his troubled perception. And then his mind seemed to clear for a distant musically inclined impression, a sound with hidden meaning encased in vague audible echoes transformed itself into a voice, at once familiar and soothing to the soul.

'Like all born of the noble blood passed on from the Seven Pure Races of Thule, mark this well stranger.' His heart beat with joy caught in an upward spiral of bliss and newly found courage. His soul strained towards the voice now sparkling like a fountain of light.

'Your courage has taken you from hearth and home, from the security of your time. But soon you will know me. I am Vargen, Sage of the Sacred Fire, Protector of the coming Solar Race which will conquer the Darkness of Zohex. The gods will blend fate and destiny to your inner will as you will aid in the destruction of the common enemy. This is your destiny.'

Astonished but not too surprised Bahnum wondered about this mysterious clarion call. Was it his Buddhist mind, was it some reincarnated sage aiding him from the mandala worlds when suddenly the melodious intonations continued: 'Journey onward until you know you have found the sacred place where we shall meet. I give you my blessings. Your determination will give the necessary strength to struggle through to the very end. Until we meet.'

The warmth and brilliance of the utterance continued to rebound in Bahnum's mind. He woke and the light he had just witnessed within his mind was still there, glorying in mellow hues as the morning sun lit the nocturnal mists of the sparkling dew encrusted vale below.

### **Afghanistan**

Kali's resurgent power having embraced Savarna's soul in her infinite womb enraptured her as she and Rana trudged towards the citadel wherein lay the secret of her long sought redemption. The pallid sun had been of little comfort amongst the icy crags of mountainous Balkh. Rana had done nothing but complain continuously about the physical exertions of the trek giving voice to the mental qualms torturing his belaboured body.

To Savarna the grey barren rocks, the shadowed valleys and harsh environment were only distant and unrelated variations of a universe quivering on the edge of blissful

and beatific discoveries. With Kali's presence in her bosom she felt incredibly agile, almost dizzy through her tendentious revelations pulsing forth from the black goddess. She hardly noticed the pinnacle of the ancient temple plateau as they made the final climb over the last ridge. Stirred into heavenly contemplation by the awesome silence of the mountains she smiled at the future eternity of her soon to be world, all hers.

It was late afternoon. The lengthening shadows cast an icy blue radiance over bleached and weathered stones. Atop the shorn off mountain she turned to face south. Savarna saw the sunlit crevice in the towering mountains which forcefully challenged the limitless sky. Further snow-capped peaks were shrouded in ghostly mists beginning to flood the deep and narrow valleys between these towering walls of granite and age blasted rocks. This was indeed a place well chosen where the mighty Turanian warlords had once ruled with such impunity.

All around she sensed the decay of time, of wasted and crumbling ruins, a cursed age to some and about to be resurrected. Scattered in physical violence of dislocated nature mounds and heaps of discarded rubble was strewn chaotically amongst the wreckage that had once been the mighty abode of a race defiant of the gods themselves. Here archimages had exercised their incredible cosmic centred glories. She could feel the long lost sensate maelstrom of intoxicating revelry where chiefs had ridden forth to spread the dreadful bane over the prostrate continent. She espied with delight the gaping darkness of the cavernous temple entrance whence kings and priests practiced their nighted mysteries rehearsing their powerful and odorous resurrections of an age long gone.

A movement amongst the rocks below startled her back into conscious wakefulness. It was a Pathan squatting with his rifle across his knees. His eagle sharp

eyes were riveted upon them both. Further back covering him was another Pathan leaning against the entrance of the ancient temple holding his powerful rifle at the ready.

They watched them with supine indifference. She stood still, hearing only Rana's stertorous breathing. An icy breeze streamed through her long black hair. A daunting silence hung about the place where no scraggy tufts of grass or weeds took root. It was truly an area of dereliction relinquished by the thriving forces of life. To the north a hawk hovered noiselessly then like a bullet it shot down disappearing into the valley below. Standing motionless in her long dusty gown she uttered a prayer to Kali, giving thanks, her eyes afire with secret delight. The bird of prey had been a good omen. She heard the panting stumbling plodding noises of her corpulent husband, red faced, glistening with sweat, eyes bulging with exhaustion as he stood at the edge of the rocky peaks. Looking at her in great expectation.

She eyed disdainfully this mass of human flesh. Rana was nothing but an innocent wanting to play for stakes no common mortal would dare hope or aspire in even their wildest of dreams. Enthralled with his self indulgent fancies Rana struggled under his own joyful delusions of pugnacious self satisfaction. To her he had become enslaved by his own ideas concerning some vague cosmic reward. It was indeed ironic. He had spurned the very source of his liberation from the whimsical and dark chaotic forces which constituted his still childish though academically trained mind. To Savarna his world was a reality which no longer had any meaning, a reality she had consciously left behind on the plains of India.

Heaving with exhaustion he gave her a weak smile. She spoke softly to him suggesting he need not continue, but he shook his head. She knew the price he might have to pay but it was not her conscience which spurred her to say this. She was afraid

the offering might be scorned by the Black Goddess. He would have none of it. Savarna knew he was unable to differentiate between what his inner nature demanded and what his superficially logical mind thought it needed. Years of preparation would now be put to the test. Eagerly he lumbered after her.

“Do you realise,” Savarna began “the danger we will place ourselves in? It is not too late to return. There is no shame in what you have chosen in this life. Your books, your daydreams, the secrets of your library. For here will shall shatter reality.”

He looked at here in genuine surprise, his brown eyes widening. “Go back? Down there? Why? Kali will protect us as will Vishnu.” He replied. Adamant.

“You sound like so many who, fortified by their religion and their search for the gods think that the simple idea of allowing a god into your heart makes it so. This is the fantasy of a self satisfying mind. Kali or Vishnu will protect us only if we deserve to be protected and that depends upon the catalyst we create, the actualisation of our own inner strength and its subsequent paranormal transformation. Without that foundation, especially when the outer world is dissolved will you need the inner strength which must be able to withstand the onslaught by which we will be engulfed.”

He nodded slowly wishing, pretending to understand. “I have practiced the sacred chants with you. I have fasted, I have carried out the ablutions expected of an adept. I have prayed, I have served Kali and Vishnu and Ganesh with all my heart and I have engaged myself in the great work for many years. What else is there to do?”

Sadly she shook her head. “That is precisely it. You follow other people’s rules and thus you are not true to yourself. You are an automatum.”

“But you, you did exactly the same as me. You followed the rules religiously intoning every syllable with scientific precision. You who followed the same rules so frantically, how can you accuse me?” he exclaimed, emotionally wounded.

“You dear husband followed the rules because you thought it was expected, because of what others demanded. Your conviction is a veil from which your true self is hid. If that veil created by your intellectual self is torn asunder, will it bare you to the powers of Kali? Who knows what else lurks amongst those ancient ruins? If your convictions are strong, if you have the true will burning like an eternal flame within, if you have a longing which overwhelms the very atoms that bind you together then enter with a stout heart and a steadfast mind. But any interruption any diversion from the path, any meandering of your mind and you will be irretrievably lost. Forever. If Kali is benevolent, well and good but that depends on how you have fortified yourself within.”

He exploded, his face red with rage. “How dare you. I,” he pounded his soft flabby body, “I have worked as hard as you and like you have followed the path. But you are power hungry and it is your ego that is deluded for you want power not just for its own sake, but for your own sake.” He stressed vehemently.

“Husband, it is precisely because you have just lashed out in this manner which proves to me how mentally unstable you really are. If a few words can upset you like this what will you do when some real malignant force manifests itself? Screaming mere words won’t help you then.” And she turned away from him walking towards the cavernous entrance. The guards had not moved.

“I am only upset in this belief of your own supremacy.” He said gloomily as he ran after her. “You think you are privileged in this do you? You think Kali is some personal protector do you? You think the gods will wait upon your person? Ha! We shall

seen.” He challenged her and like some pontificating ruler strode towards the temple’s entrance.

For a moment Savarna’s vision was clouded by a beastlike basilisk lurking within the mountain. It lasted for only a fraction of time but long enough for her to grasp intuitively that it could be tamed. Still she shuddered at the thought which had so inexplicably crossed her mind.

To Savarna it was obvious Rana laboured under an overwhelming impression. Maybe his faith would carry him through the challenge which awaited them both. He was to her the type of person who really did belong in the world of everyday society, of academic books full with their own cramped rules and stifling regulations. His world was not of the free spirit but existed instead within the limitations and security offered by his pedestrian mind. No, he did not belong here. She trembled at the thought of Kali actually demanding her dreadful promise, insisting upon the relinquishing of Rana’s life. Amongst the eroded stones of this once majestic edifice, now lying about in calamitous profusion she kneeled and intoned her prayers to Kali.

Rana following Savarna walked bravely into the portentous temple fully aware of the ageless wakefulness around him for had not this fane survived the violent pandemonium of hoary ages? It reassured him that within this ancient place the presence of invisible forces still impregnated this sacred mountain temple. He was ready to expand himself into its arcane secrets lingering here, spun in pregnant solitude woven from the infinite blackness of space by potent minds and infused into the very stone, breathing the very air of these time forgotten chambers of power.

The two Pathans had been ordered to allow the Indian couple to enter the ancient temple. See what had driven them to this time forgotten edifice.



The silent gleaming columns with their demanding symbols invigorated Rana as he continued to tread amongst the huge vault. Secrets suddenly recognised spoke to him enlightening him about what he had always somehow known within. He was prepared for the ultimate.

Coming to a side entrance whence a stairwell descended into the depths. The declivity led into a subterranean chamber barely visible. Yet there emerged a strange misty glow emanating as he approached the raised dais of their previous revelation. The light was diaphanous. At its point of origin he gasped as he saw the mysterious tablet from whence this light escaped with such geometric precision. Around the dais sat silent figures umbraged in the chill light as if awaiting him. He took his place amongst them. Nothing was said. Rana accepted the situation.

Shuja was adept in exploring ancient revelations. The remnants emanating from dead gods left only, but still discernable, weak resonances. The old wizard king Zohex had uttered from his hopefully atrophied mind dire illusions until they too had been blown away by later generations of occult minds. Shuja was aware that Zohex had finally been repelled, forced into the uncharted darkness beyond the limits of this universe. And he wanted it to remain this way. He knew of the original adamite gods and their sordid abominations that clung so desperately to this almighty source. As such he had to cleave off the malignancies accompanying the rising colossal threat hinting of unspeakable monsters and preferably long dead monstrosities.

Choleric laughter echoed through the chamber, the stalking wishful triumphant vibrations ever awaiting the unsuspecting seeker. The first wisps of their illusionary phantasms had already entered this earthly realm. Their presence had to be destroyed.

That was why Savarna and Rana had been allowed to join this resurrective incantation.

For their hearts were jealous and filled with evil. Let alike attract alike.

Such had been his powers that even now, surrounded by living ghosts in the inner temple structure where this core of inperdurable stone had so easily withstood the ravages of millennia. Eons of human folly had levelled the surrounding buildings as nature too eroded monuments. Shattered by blind violence.

But below nothing had changed the conflagrations engulfing the citadel except that the secret archimage Merduk had cleverly withdrawn into the runes of time, encased in fabled spells hidden in this remarkable location. He was both here and not here. Now a misty darkness clung to these stones breeding nasty habits into the upper remaining ruins wherein he sat. Ancient baleful enchantments resurrected bad dreams infusing their alien psychic creations, the ghosts reflecting their ethereal nature in shifting shifts of perspective, drawing the mind into their maimed orbit. And to be negated.

Shuja focussed upon the all absorbing ebon power. His mentally coercive energies circumnavigated the pulsing darkness. Defensive mantras he formed beyond the reach of haughty demons and their slavishly inspired circumscribed mortals. Upon the irradiate tablet on the raised dais Shuja placed strange powders of an exotic nature encouraging a rising of quivering lambencies. A crystalline quadric mandala formed into the twelve sacred signs. Omens of penultimate protection. Shuja was pleased. He uttered a single syllable, the vibration pouring through the dark mists and ghosts. Flaring sheet lightning flashed fanning the urgent catalyst to draw out the old guardian from the crumbled devastation of time and memory. The ghosts became eclipsing lights, their source the void like depths of this unholy cavern beneath the tablet.

A thick swirling sinister glowing ether flashed into the inner precinct. Behind this glowing body of dark light a gap formed itself onto the fabric of space. From within this realm the formless void flooded the chamber with easy abandon. Shuja was alert watching this mass that was neither shape or form, solid or gaseous nor the ether moving amongst the assembled mental wreckage like a bloated swelling indeterminate mass. This was the magical effluvium which had been ingrained into this ancient structure through ancient sorcery. These were the remnant thought patterns which Shuja was drawing forth into the present.

He did not focus on the ever shifting, undulating, pulsating glowing chimeras. To ascertain the transformed surroundings Shuja's whole being concentrated upon the small space between the dark mists, between the resurrected distortions doomed to destruction even before their moment of conception. Thus did he discern the movements of something other, something even darker. Amongst the nodules of light reflecting misty galaxies hidden by gaseous clouds of splintered light mirroring hidden suns he saw the darkness encroaching, a moving growing adumbration, hideous in concept, carrying portents of decay within its expansive matrix. He espied in fascination that its movement could be attributed more so by default of this construct. Moving inexorably towards this location.

Adopting the sacred posture, ignoring the gathered who seemed less than substantial apart for Shuja, ignoring and being ignored with Savarna now behind him Rana closed his eyes in mindful contemplation. The essence of the goddess appeared soon after. Her eyes bulging, riven, her dripping necklace of human skulls, her serpentine body moving to the infernal rhythm of her vast domain. She infused her sacred breath

with his, a pursy liquid flowing connecting the supplicant with his votive cosmic powers. How easy it all was. He drank greedily the celestial mana and felt distinctly the vaporous substance diffuse through his body and mind. Eagerly he gulped the heavenly grail coming from within the fiery blood drenched goddess. As the liquid flowed into him Kali began to dissolve herself until only the dimly illumed shadow of her former self remained. She surrounded Rana in a cloud of gossamer mist.

Savarna's voice rose sonorously, a flowing ardent emotion banishing the nudging chaos Rana felt arising in the recital of alien incantations. Savarna knew how to neutralise the ancient and now adulterated powers fused with nefarious wizardry. It was a net of energy spearheading into the resurrection that was coming. What Savarna was to keep at bay were the old primal fears condensed by insane beings caught in their dark abysmal cosmic sleep threatening to come to life.

The essence of their manifestation was like a riveting trance girdling these decayed minds now found in equally decayed realms in deep distant space. Realms moving towards her. Rana could not manage to extricate himself from this opening so near. It clung to him, enticed him to fathom its strange illusions. There were many. He could not shake his mind of its captivating spell. Instead he was caught in a paroxysm of execrable spasms, dreadfully damp breath, not Kali's. A rotting putrefaction poured into him. Of an essence which ought to have been banished, as unbeknown to him it was. These were not the powers of the secrets he had so assiduously studied but were viperous poisons invading him with foreordained and conclusive usurpation.

Rana did not hear the guiding voice of Shuja's bringing to life those qualities which relieved the other practitioners of this primordial evil, an evil fading for them into an entropied and garbled dissolution. The many images collapsing into themselves in a

lilac orb hovering near a huge black star. To Rana the primal vision of nefarious horror called forth from the damp moist earthen soaked perfidy entrapped him with a focussed desperate hunger. The feculent abomination, hiding its identity, existing seemingly since the beginning of time would cease only with the ultimate end of the universe. Or so he thought. So for the moment the spawned offspring were busily germinating and mutating within its domain, awaiting bodily manifestation to continue their existence. This life encumbering virus stalked the edges of reality and creation. To reawaken its true form in Rana's stricken and now secluded mind.

The soothing voice of Shuja resonated serenely amongst the temple's cavernous recesses spreading through the assembled ghostlike supplicants in soft delectable hues of spiritual comfort. But to Rana it had become an incomprehensible distorted intonation. A brooding silence lingered sneeringly alongside, opening a deep cacoon within him. This was a depth so stupendous and profound that it left him spellbound in its eerie revelation. The engulfing voice created a titanic struggle forcing into him a turgid tension as he desperately tried to regain his lost equilibrium. But the risen seminal forces used that tension in Rana to creep into his living flesh with such abject determination that he had by now no real conception of his predestined fate.

The beleaguering forms were in themselves vestiges of cursed and now reawakened hells forcing their way into the space that was Rana's body. Instead of the melodious spells being woven by the protective mantle of Kali he felt only the threat of an invading disease released from its primitively crafted unnatural bonds. Rana thought of Kali but was greeted instead by this alien invasion as he tried to cling to some sort of sanity which was ravishing him with such joyous delight.

No mantra, no prayer, no vision of Kali came to light, let alone usurp this strange and hungry intrusion. What worlds, what avenues of space could contain such beings unimpeachable even by the gods? Such parasites should not exist so freely in this stunted and sick environ. They were the recumbent emanations from somewhere not of this universe. It was as if a gate had been opened and he had been touched by this ruinous reality created by fallen creatures, entropied mutations. Although presumed deceased they had been reanimated and now greedily sought out his life. The air around him had become suffocatingly stagnant. The ancient monstrosities obeying no laws known to Rana were inhibitors of a terrible world which now passed their monstrous seminal life into his.

The semblance of something so outré was hard for Rana to bear. A dismally aborted form of life seeped into him with the force and persistence of leeching vermin depleting his vital energy as their mutilating ripples passed through his numbed and shocked body. The evil hatred raged about him, anticipating its triumph, the dissolute forces goading over his pretence to their formidable powers.

Rana recognised, too late that Savarna had been right after all. His childish attitude had led him into the abyss. But dead he was not. The paralysis of his body might have been complete but something still recognised itself in this rotting babbling vivisection as the abominable bestial form rose to engulf him. With one last frantic urge and desperate cry he longed, begged for Kali's redemption. Hardly conscious of himself, as dank fleeting shadows hovered throughout his fallen soul the victorious prey focussed and gnawed upon the last remains of his living flesh slowly corroding him into a lifeless bundle of quivering ordure where the remaining, frantically twitching muscles and nerve

endings, Rana's last remains were devoured by a foulness unbeknown even to the vilest of gods.

Shuja concentrated on the ancient liturgies which sprouted the dangerous correspondence within the abyss. As the dark appeared to grow in intensity the mists began to loose their sparkling effulgence, their energies fusing into the flaring spectral emanation, a prowling adamite essence, reaching out from the, so close, lilac orb with its multiple realities. Shuja was indifferent to this play of power even though the growing living mass flowing upon the silent wind from space accompanied with their weird longings and surprising terrors he felt himself an entity amongst this near suffocating inky blackness.

As reality collapsed the darkness transformed into serpentine dragons, the guardians of this sacred chamber. A particular event extracted from the lilac sphere where many realities jostled for attention. He could sense the death and rancid blood which pulsed within them, sensed their bodies, survivors of a dead age. The stench increased as they folded their wings in such close proximity, having scented their prey. Their smell nearly choked Shuja as the primal scream of their victim echoed in the temple. A sickening crunch and the beasts satiated themselves on the offering. Shuja turned to Rana being devoured, the quaking pieces of bloodied flesh, the tufts of hair and blood spurting out of the beasts fanged jaws, chewing his last remains. Shuja was not concerned about the proffered fate of Rana now a fractured carcass, his spitted remains mingled with their oozing saliva dripping from the antediluvian monsters. They were merely one of many alternatives he had accessed.

Savarna curiously enough had also thus passed the guardians and Shuja comprehended she too had used Rana as bait to further both their advance into the abysmal realm leading to a near infinity of possibilities.

The extricated insertion done. The lilac sphere where multiple realities jostled for attention only one had been called forth by Shuja.

Along with Savarna they were in one of Zohex's ancient domains. The smell of death permeated the very stones of the temple with sibilant laughter following his progress. Was the laughter Savarna's? A potency amongst this structure with chill winds mournfully caressing him in the silent tomb. Unnerving portents were present. He knew he had to keep on moving knowing he must not allow his mind to dwell for even a fragment of time on these luring cataleptic illusions. Real and not real. Who or what slithered amongst these monstrous vortices of night he dared not imagine. Here were no pictures, no statues, absolutely nothing to lighten the heart and mind in this stoned hell. Even the shades of the dead had to flee lest they be devoured. He refused to formulate any conceptions about this place, thus inadvertently calling them to life. Rana's fate. He stopped. The silent musty putrid wind had ceased. Towards the left was the entrance to what he sought.

He knew he was entering a wizard's cauldron, a deep reservoir of things not yet alive in the still and unexplored vagaries of time. A time when death reigned supreme prior the far fetched genesis of life here on Earth. A hollow sound greeted him. A sickened wind coming from the open fissures within the earth where nothing could breed and live. Along he presumed with Savarna where only a madness of reminiscent deeds were entwined here. Or more precisely the distorted mind that later would become



Zohex. A power that had taken the form of Zohex masquerading as a sentient living being. Spawned at the edge of space, distant but now here. Zohex a potentiality exuding a putrescent metamorphic abhorrence. It would serve him well. With steadfast orientation Zohex's desultory and narcotic web approached Shuja.

With determined gaze Savarna fronted the coiling serpentine dragons, their foul breath contaminating the air around her. The stench unbearable. Lifting her arms in sublimation she prayed to Kali the devouring principle of the universe. Kali the destroying energy of earth, Kali the scourge of the impure annihilating those enemies who crossed the paths of her initiated and faithful devotees. With steely gaze Savarna saw the shimmering monstrosities hover over the trembling figure of Rana. His corpulent frame transfixed, eyes of immutable terror riveted upon the advancing beasts. Savarna intoned in high pitched voice her prayers necessary in securing her own passage.

“Oh Hari, who in the shape of the serpent bearest Chandika. Bear my evils and avert my misfortune. Thy shape, O serpent assumed by Hari to punish and under that form, tyrants are slain. Hail three eyed goddess who art the destroyer of evil spirits, salutations to thee.”

Infused with these holy words Savarna prayed for the offering to be acceptable to the serpentine goddess. The beasts had devoured most of Rana's body now splintered bones and torn gore, ligaments still flapping with nervous energy as the last of his blood gushed forth. Savarna rushed forward with maddened glee, picking up the bloodied severed head of Rana, his eyes still rolling from the horror that had struck him dead. Picking up the gruesome object she drank greedily the spurting blood, her eyes dilated in a toxic frenzy drinking to her lust's content, blood splattered over her robes and face. She

smashed open the skull and tore out the red and grey globulating mass of blubbery brain stuffing her mouth eagerly with the sweet, soft, delicious meat, devouring the life force of the sacrifice. The gory feast done she took the untouched hands still in a clutching expression of agony and fastened them onto her girdle. The fractured skull she clasped onto a special necklace around her bosom.

“And now O Mother of Black Redemption, as I slew the Asura Chanda and Mandra who born from the slayed giant having oppressed the three worlds, I seek thee to enable me to destroy those who would dare trespass your worshippers, your supplicants, your devotees. Let none cross my path without suffering the penalty of thy victims, here laid before the gates and before thee who art now within me, sublime Deva. Here then I will worship with thee in the inmost and dark recesses to which you have led me where I will seek thy protection and that of thy consort Shiva the Destroyer I obediently will follow thy will.” She rose proudly walking confidently into the murky vault. The great beasts parted before her.

Having lost all sense of her mundane personality the goddess Kali raged in Savarna’s blood. Kali the Dark Power of Salvation led her onwards, towards her desire, her work, her vision of complete fulfilment. She drifted over the ancient passageway ever inwards as if she had arrived at Mount Kailasa, dwelling place of the gods. She would wrest the mana from the recumbent gods or tear them apart if need be. Savarna was Kali coming to worship Shiva the Bright Destroyer and take what others were too niggardly to even contemplate. She would be the one, the holy, the chosen.

Her body slowly transmuted into the deep fiery crucible from whence the transmogrification would complete itself, herself. Then the power of cosmic gods would flow into her once the fabric woven by the nether powers had been dissolved. She felt the

stirring of Chindika mutating into two serpents emerging from the base of her spine, winding around her neck, becoming her extra sensory organs with their supramundane perception.

Another power drew her onwards and she followed the psychic shadow left by Shuja. His auric scent impregnated the atmosphere which her serpent guardians sensed. Her mind became filled with a delightful clarity. A realisation just beyond the reach of both intellect and intuition sharpening her whole perception aided by her growing ophidian incubi. Thence flowed a welling current bristling about her as she became the divine receptacle of arcane gods. She continued to follow the mental shadow left by her valiant psychopomps. The beasts aware of the charged environment and pressed onwards into an avalanche of sublime resonances.

An eerie silence drew her towards the chamber where she felt Shuja's wavering emanation. The tension of the dragon power increased dramatically, impelling her onwards. She was at the entrance and following with urgent restraint she entered the whirling staircase engulfed in venerable stone. The chamber guarding its nameless menace.

A column of secreted light glowed darkly, a blackening mire of doom laden air filled the cramped space. Shuja sat motionless as one already dead. He had not noticed her entrance, said nothing, intoned nothing. No muscle on his face showed the slightest semblance of living flesh. And the penumbrating shaft, this axis was drawing forth secret powers from otherwise unknown harmonic spheres, more precisely a lilac sphere beyond the known cosmos. To Savarna the shaft looked like the lichenous glow of the lingam, the symbol of the ancient earth which to the ignorant solicited misconceived illusions,

suffuse nightmares, babbling inanities turning the psychotic delusions of humanity into reality.

She moved forwards, cautiously, nearly driven to frenzy by her urging serpents. As Savarna stepped closer she felt an invisible resistance limiting her movements. Like an unseen rubbery mass or an extreme lethargy in her limbs it invoked a repulsion beyond her reasoning. Urged onwards by her beasts the pressure became almost unbearable as the resistance continuously increased and receded as she advanced or moved away from this lustrous centre. Shuja had not moved, a statue of lifelessness, the column reflected in his dark shining eyes. She saw at last the reason for this: he had protected himself by a mighty spell barring all intrusion, absorbing the axial power to her exclusion, unruffled by even the serpentine presences.

Her eyes agleam with the raging fires of Kali, her mind flared into bright anger. She struggled with the physical powers as she made repeated attempts at a forced intrusion into the centre only to be ever more repelled. Exhausted she rested at the winding staircase. Her neck began to grow cold as the clammy serpents would themselves around her, their bright yellow eyes flashing venomously at the ungained object. Again she tested the invisible wall and still the pliant resistance checked her advance. She prayed to Shiva reasoning that his potent crescent moon on his shining head around which his own serpents coiled might just penetrate the sorcerous barrier. Supplicating Shiva she intoned with deadly locutive vehemence her prayer:

“Hear me O Shiva who roams about in dreadful cemeteries, indulging in unearthly feasts, attended by hosts of ghosts, or sprites, of goblins and all the hellish creatures of damnation, listen to my prayer. You who like a man possessed by infinite madness naked with dishevelled hair, wearing garlands of dead men’s skulls and

ornaments of human bones, driven by delight of one who sinned, beloved of the deranged, the loft of the Bhutas revealing the nature of Darkness I call upon you as Mritunjaya, conqueror of Death to protect me against this evil here. Come to me as Shanu the Everlasting, manifest as Digambara the one clothed in Space, give me the wisdom of Tryambaka the Three Eyed for with the Opening of your Third Eye your enemies are instantly destroyed. Present yourself as Maheshwara the Great God, I implore you, allow yourself to manifest in what form you please.”

Her beasts uncoiled. Having recharged their strength they edged themselves forewords, penetrating the invisible barrier as they extended themselves from her neck. Shuja neither flickered a muscle nor made a move and Savarna guessed she could, with the divine aid granted her, conquer anything and anyone for she had gained and now possessed the serpents of Shiva. Fully salient and undeniable they had become her consorts.

Savarna had momentarily become a part of the serpent consciousness which began to advance, slow and lissom, their reflexes ready for the slightest of forbodence, ready to strike the magus at any given moment. The serpent mind, a marriage of Kali and Shiva could not be so easily dismissed even by the most powerful of adepts. She took sedulous care not to be overwhelmed by her own potential or to rush madly into the sacred enclosure. If this upstart magus succeeded in his plans he would be master of the world. No secret would remain unknown to him, no plan sprung in surprise, no deviation unaccounted for. He would be invincible if not eternal. He would command with equal dexterity the realms of the yet unmanifest. She shook in anger fearing he still might gain this glory for himself alone.

The serpents stealthily cautioned their way onwards, edging through the resilient barrier, closing upon the shafted light. She could feel the urge to lash out, to strike but she kept these animistic instincts in check. She must be wary not to fall into any contrived delusions spun by Shuja's occult mind. The result would be as baneful as that of Rana's and she had no wish to have her serpentine powers dissipated so readily. She checked their advance which had met as yet with no resistance. She as much as they hovered close to both column of dark light and Shuja.

The air of this sacerdotal centre was laden with memories of a long lost nirvana vibrating from the serpents back to her mind, dripping with a heavy fructifying grace. She began to feel the Elixir, the puissant vigour when, with sudden horror she drew back. She had nearly fallen into a subtle and cunning illusion, a clever trap. By waylaying her determination and her goal she could easily have been trapped here for nigh but an eternity, indulging in the illusionary emanations created by Shuja's magic. And while she would have dreamt of all that she humanly desired he would have woven an invisible and comatose charm about her, a blissful semblance of dastardly treachery. Shuja would have finished his task only to slip away unnoticed. Eons later she would have woken from her happy and delirious dreams amongst the silence and the ancient stones of a temple devoid of any powers.

The serpents continued to probe with infinite caution so as not to plunge into this ocean of supreme and divine bliss. There was plenty of time for that later. She had suffered not harm and she thanked her serpentine vigilance for the narrow escape. The task ahead of her was clear. She simply had to siphon the energy direct. Aware of the mausolean silence she began to feel this field of force nearly touching the glowing shafted light coming from that distant lilac realm. So far so good. She looked up,

followed its trajectory towards the night sky, the inky dark of eternity revealing unknown stars and alien constellations. She had begun to tap the source, the same which had given the Hindu gods their ancient heritage and the power to conquer space itself.

### **Balkh**

Martin woke startled hearing the approach of people. Under sheep covers. Max was not there. As in dreams the voices were distant disturbances coming closer. Heard the muffled hooves of animals and subdued foreign chatter. The Afghanis greeted Martin with a benign and some toothless smile. Their weather beaten faces tough as leather

betraying nothing of their noble bearing. These were no ignorant mountain peasants.

Something about them hinted at a dignified lineage going back generations.

Yehensho's grasp of their language was passable enough to adequately communicate with them. Martin had on his part learnt about thirty words, enough to make simple statements which helped to create an atmosphere of good will. And so Martin and Yehensho were aware of the events leading to the last hours of Akbar and Muhammed. More guards had been posted since the raid. Scouts were sent out to make sure none of Rosenberg's accomplices tried to attempt the sabotage of the ancient temple where Shuja was presently practicing his devotions.

The westerners Martin and Max belonged to had thus caused some problems. Rosenberg was now the enemy which put Martin, Max and Yehensho in a precarious situation. But the delegated tribal elders understood they had been duped. As far as they were concerned Rosenberg and the others who had so surreptitiously entered their domain were now abhorred, who had to be found and put to justice. But herein lay another problem. Someone had attacked them. All they found were signs of a violent struggle with body parts strewn around the smouldering rubble.

Yehensho conversed with Martin about the twisted affair. He felt at sea. During his first days of refuge amongst these hill tribes Martin became convinced that Yehensho was inextricably involved with Shuja's, not Rosenberg's plans. Except when Martin pressed him for details he retreated into his Buddhist mien, reticent, indifferent which left Martin a little mentally frustrated.

After a simple meal of hot flat bread, eggs and smoked goats meat a small lean woman appeared, dressed in black and escorted Martin deeper into this warren of tunnels. He heard the squawking of chickens, the bleating of sheep and goats mingled with their



distinctive aroma added to the numerous pack animals and their droppings which was used for fuel. The older woman showed Martin to a small hollowed out rock formation, roomy enough to sleep in without being unduly disturbed by their activities. She left a candle and Martin thanked her in his limited way as she trundled off only to return with his sheepskins, his sleeping bag, and rucksack. Along with a gourd of goats milk which he consumed thankfully. To his surprise she bade him good night. He had thought it was morning. Ah well.

A host of questions assailed Martin's overworked imagination robbing him of his rest. He felt his brain ready to crack and splinter under the stress caused by Rosenberg's surprising turn. In the end he gave up. Between fitful sleep were bouts of semi awareness. Mental wheels turning somersaults formulating outlandish ideas. His brain indulging in strange mythologies infiltrating the present. An evil burrowing itself into reality. Trying to come to grips with its ingress.

Homing in on the Levant. Hit by a psychic distortion. It's inherent evil that of humanity being flawed. Creating the flaw. It's heinous vision infesting a discordant Europe which soon had slaughtering Christianity set loose. Becoming a degenerative necrogenic pollution assuming its own horror riven rationality which somehow left other cultures, other people unmoved.

Neither the Hindu or Chinese civilisations had displayed the collective mental breakdown which swept over the European continent with such religious fervour. Nor did they suffer from semblant visions and perversions of an impious, unholy and anti human nature. Not the institutionalised insanity of mono theism where people and books were burned with equanimity. The desecration of sacred pagan temples testimony to their demented spirituality. A festering mental sickness and religious imbecilism turning its

inhabitants into cretinous and lunatic progenitors. They had wantonly retarded by centuries the otherwise healthy pagan developments of learning and rational inquiry. A holy perversion in unholy sanctimony. Poisoning a whole continent. Glorifying in victorious death incarnated by some mad fiendish arch god. Unhinging minds for centuries. So why would Rosenberg want to violate an ancient temple here? Was there some power inherent within its sacred precincts that would usurp the delusions the Hebrews, the Christians and the Muslims adhered to. Or could the strange tablet trigger an even greater madness threatening not just the present here but warp the very fabric of the human mind into a religiously corruption, squatting hideously like a wasting disease upon those weak enough to succumb to its dark enthrallment.

Not that he knew. Was Jacko, he realised to his horror, a part of this manifestation? Manipulated by distant mad gods? It was all a bit too much. Exhausted he went to sleep.

### **Vahnsin**

Merduk had fused his remote vision with the beasts still hovering over the distant lands where the dark wizard Shaviscara was dreaming of his own resurgence. His army might have been defeated when Tellurium was destroyed but that did not stop him from laying new plans. In the temple retreat where Merduk concentrated upon the incoming imagery whilst immersed in the inner chamber's exuding black light he found that this exudence was connected to a vast realm at the edge of the universe. Its lilac orb

containing a multitude of realities almost a copy of WebSpace but with one major difference. It was separate wholly unconnected. A major realm of its own and behind it the massive black star at the centre of the galaxy from whence he and Zohex originated. So Zohex was much more than a mere demented ruler in this realm. A timely reminder just how much was at stake. He could see no way to curtail Zohex. The energy alone powering his data realm was phenomenal. Yet Zohex by all appearances was cautious. He would not take him on regarding this ingress of power. Instead he focused on the now childish folly of Dauthus and that of his voluptuous queen. Concerned with their pithy indulgences and overweening vanity.

The city of Khasnesh itself was a dazzling shining splendour. Something to behold. Intricately arrayed protective walls engraved with countless golden bass reliefs, temples of odd abstract designs, marble arched bridges reflecting the sun on their polished stone, sparkling fountains spraying radiant mists into the air; unlike this monstrous pile at Vahnsin the city was immersed in a shrouded aura of pining romance. Now this crafting by magic of stone infusing life was deluding its ruler. He had lost his way through his addiction to form mastering substance. The great cosmic energies concentrated heavily in his magnificent temples which were being choked by an overbearing morose notion of beauty. Enhancing the coming decay. Encroaching death following in its wake.

Merduk had observed the rather mundane celebrations and rituals of the Sacred Fire. Aware of Lethena's determination to incur her wrath upon the king's sister, a girl of simple magnificence exuding a radiant innocent happiness. Instead dark shadows had watched over the malfeasant ceremony. Malicious signs appeared and yet no one seemed to have perceived any of this. Still the configuration of the stars told Merduk of the

foreboding disaster. Dauthus flushed with his victories over the Dravidians indulged instead in trivialities whilst pretending to be the supreme ruler of all Asia. The time of his reign was starting to fray. All revealed by the telepathic beasts as they hovered in the shimmering clouds over the city.

About to recall his pterodactyls a sudden flash of light almost blinded him. Merduk sensed the sudden change and Devasi, the centre of everyone's attention had vanished. She too it seemed had a distinct future of which she was not fully aware or the burden she carried in her delectable bosom. No wonder Lethena wished her dead. Devasi in her simplicity carried enough of her god's potency to usurp the weakening kingdom. She neither wasted nor dissipated her powers upon emotional and egotistical desires burning so fiercely in the ancient Turanian Race.

So he fixed his mind upon Dauthus, the weak link in the chain. There he lay with his beloved queen. Her flashing aura one great deliquescent cesspool of damnation. Slowly the bodily form of the king became opaque amongst the golden marbled chamber studded with glowing censers. No longer the vibrant vitality that had made their race rulers but turning into a cadaverous exudation drained of life. As was the king. The lady was a vamp.

Merduk commanded the beasts to search for Devasi. Leaving they flew over verdurous and the bucolic patterned arabesque landscape. The sub continent spread before him. Devasi had vanished into thin air. Concerned Merduk gathered his thoughts.

How perfectly clever the Dravidians and their renegade tribes plot was. These people it occurred to him had merely feigned their defeats. Falling under the yoke of Zohex a sham. Even the Elders of Elburz faked their ineptitude and mental sterility. This

bankruptcy began to be a fantastic cloak, an image without substance and he too had believed it. The walls echoed and reverberated with Merduk's laughter.

Someone with Devasi had obviously begun to scheme the advance of the coming Solar Race. The Renegades and the Dravidians were preparing themselves psychically, waiting to release their own powers and hurl them at the might of Vahnsin and Katharis. It looked like Tellurium all over again. Though both races had survived but like two orbiting suns were eternally caught in each other's gravitational fields. And neither of them could eradicate the other. So Dauthus and Zohex considered themselves invincible.

It was tiresome. Merduk did not really care about the squabbles, the interplay of dark forces designed to gain a minor foothold here on this small corrupted planet. He made up his mind yet again. Zohex carrying out the demented plan of the Primaians who wanted to turn Earth into a mirror image of their own world. Corrupting the planet's living resonance and all beneath it. He would cease to humour Zohex and continue with his plan which was more akin to the Reganians who had sent him here. Originally to watch Zohex. But Zohex was now, thanks to that distant lilac orb which held multiple realities in its grasp, more than what he had been upon arriving. The original simulacrum had first developed a persona and was now sentient. A potent and dangerous mix since he was still to a degree under the control of the deep visionaries of Prima. His home planet. He would leave them to their insipient struggles more interested in what Devasi would do.

It took a while and after some persistent searching he sensed her presence and her tantalising beauty. With spatial continuity. A radiance discreetly illuming the very atoms of her supra mundane body. Devasi an insert. A silent emissary, a unique carrier of profound and pregnant powers of which she herself was only just becoming aware.

Devasi irradiated herself like a birthing star something he could not fully fathom.

Superimposed were three dimensional mandalas in lighted patterns stretched out from her glowing centre reaching the ten cardinal points and seven dimensions of space. Not even Regum's WebSpace let alone WebWorld reached that far into space. Devasi was indeed an alien insert.

So the first adept of the new race had begun to trigger into psychic activity the leaders of the coming struggle. This Merduk guessed intuitively. A third party. If Elburz was involved in this then their time here was marked. The two occult kingdoms would soon be either dreams by the demented or nightmares by the sane. Either way they were destined to be distant memories.

Devasi had begun to fulfil her own destined path. Still a catalyst might be necessary, a potency which when combined with her would complete her manifest programme. Power of and over the seven dimensions of space. Way beyond Regum's potential. It was an act of sheer lunacy to try, let alone threaten the destruction of this girl. The catalyst could be terrestrial or an entity coming across like himself. For Zohex things he hoped were spinning out of control, threatening the stability of his own inserted presence. So how important then was Shaviscara?

Returning the beasts who flew once more over Dauthus's city he noticed strange transparent malignancies settling over the city and surrounding countryside. The jewel encrusted splendour no longer greeted his mental gaze. Nor were the rich pastures or the emerald flowers present when he had previously gazed upon them in rapturous delight. The place was devoid of life. Only fleeting shadows hovered sinisterly amongst the riveting emptiness. Something awful and insanely dangerous had spread itself over the city. Gibbering purulescent corpses greeted him in that repulsive domain inundated by a

suffocating distemper. Subliminal malformations, charnelled iniquities had entered the lofty portals as Merduk recoiled almost shocked in horror. He quickly emptied his mind by time tested mantras and discovered the reason for this sudden degeneration.

A conflict had arisen between Lethena and Dauthus over the fate and subsequent escape of Devasi. Dauthus maddened with rage, his mind under a cloud of an insatiable manic urge had called forth from his twisted soul a vivid phantom not to be hurled against Lethena or Devasi but against the queen's father, the dark wizard Shaviscara.

Who never expected this since all thought Dauthus to be a weakling ruled by the queen. Dauthus had evoked a horde of not just destructive phantoms but also their horrific world presenting itself as a maleficent image ready to devour his enemies. And although Shaviscara was his prime object of hate the king thus also rid himself in this demented manner of the only woman he thought he had ever loved. Her satiate charms, her voluptuous body, her long agile legs, her bright but devious mind had left him just once too often in a deeply distressed state. Her fascinating corruption had at last become too much. He wondered if she was not in reality a hideous lamiae hiding her lycanthropic tendencies. She always left him feeling like a wasted effigy. His despondency finally shattered their bond. He thus sought his revenge from beyond the spheres reaching into the demented depths of the abyss.

And so having torn the veil without any precautions the exsufflation poured forth and settled upon not just this great city but the land as well. The phantoms danced in the minds of the people devouring their souls in grotesqueries, debaucheries and gluttonous animal cravings. His pernicious revenge unleashed hellish fires whose bent visions tore asunder the brilliant temple, the magnificent temple, the proud city and its fertile lands leaving a bleeding and broken corruption. Dauthus's own cravings resurrected with

deliberation Ahriman's most sordid insanities transcending even Shaviscara's utmost putrescences. All that remained were flinching mute shadows bathed in a crepuscular gloom, a mocking verisimilitude of tremulous livid indomitable excrementations. The kingdom was no more.

Merduk dismissed the beasts who vanished from his inner sight. He knew even if Zohex did not that the promised destiny of the Turanian Race had finally begun to come to an end. The occult kings had become so degenerate that the cosmic cycles were turning against them. With Vahnsin doomed Zohex's containment field had to collapse also.

Merduk rose, slightly agitated. If destruction was immanent then could his world use the decay of the very forces which threatened be reconfigured, or given the strange history of this planet, would it restructure itself into an even greater danger?

He paced the floor knowing only too well Zohex could have ruled the continent. Instead he ruled the rocks, dirt. His dream of contaminated magnificent promise which under his tutelage was a mere vacancy. The resonance inserted by their deep visionaries bent out of all sane proportions. Merduk would have to act. WebSpace having only a tenuous grip in this part of the cosmos. The future of this world still hung in a precarious balance.

All this Zohex and the idiotic weakling were busy wasting because of the moronic folly of Shaviscara and Lethena. Perhaps he consoled himself a glimmer of their might could well still survive when in some future age, this time of Merduk's choosing individuals who would arise and do his bidding. There was still the distant desert continent where Zohex had extended himself into. Though its people were weaker under resurgent powers Merduk might bring that to a halt as well. He was beginning to have



serious doubts if the Reganian's WebSpace could withstand what was unfolding here in this corner of the universe.

### **Moscow**

The Red Star shining from the top of Spassky Tower bathed the spacious room in its haloed light. Flooding the heavy ornate furniture and its attendant ornaments until their distinctiveness was submerged in a dull red veiled aura. Leonid Brezhnev did not notice this display of suffocating monochrome. Wrapped in a cosy blanket he was relaxing in the warm room, having dismissed his aides and his secretary for the night. He longed for a moment of solitude, reminiscing with olden memoires. He felt ill at ease. His health was failing and he could not reconcile himself to this physical fact of life.

He remembered how Kissinger had remarked to him on a hunting trip in the United States that he was the epitome of the Russian bear: steadfast, stolid, patient and deadly once driven to fight. Now his body had its own way of weakening him, impressing upon him a mood of inertia and indifference.

He sorely needed a vacation. To rest and recuperate and relinquish everybody's complaints. The factories were behind their production quotas, targets were not being

met, agriculture continued to produce dismal results something even the bright young Gorbechov could not fix. Carter was becoming equivocal especially after their debacle with Iran. Poland was obstreperous. He did not care but many other people did.

Then there was Boris Ponomarev who was continually hatching plans with Marshal Ogarkov. Their cohort Admiral Gorshikov was restive. These three he well knew presented the influence of the all too necessary Politburo. Now Andropov of all people was becoming more difficult especially since they had the Defence Council and the Collegium on their side. The International Department was turning the Foreign Ministry into one of their own sub departments. The latest skirmish to emerge concerned Colonel Dubrov. In charge of the Central Asian desk he was steadily loosing his grip on Afghanistan. Now Dubrov had the nerve, prompted by Andropov to lay the debacle at the feet of the Politburo.

He thought back to September, just a few weeks ago when he had entertained a guest the West had largely ignored. He wished his comrades would do the same now and again. Correspondents from 'Pravda' and the 'Red Star' had come and gone and Taraki, fresh from Havana had been smiling, flashing his gold capped teeth, his jovial face delighted with the reception the Russian people had given him. Together they had spoken of friendship, of cooperation and most importantly of money. Soviet money. Brezhnev remembered how popular his predecessor Daoud had been. Except he had locked up the entire communist party of Afghanistan. Oddly enough there had been a fight in the Politburo and the KGB who had wished to retain him but Brezhnev disagreed. And it had nothing to do with the purge of their confreres.

But Daoud was deposed. The result was that Western aid had at first dwindled and then ceased altogether. He convinced the Politburo to plug the gap and now millions

vanished into that country in foreign aid. Then the KGB, that is Andropov had a brainstorm. In order to salvage the country Karmal should replace the unpopular Prime Minister. Brezhnev maintained that Karmal was far too weak to handle the task. Instead Taraki assumed the leadership through his own well planned coup. Thus he surprised the world at large, or those at least who paid attention to that part of the world. Even they were taken aback by this bold and daring move. The mullahs grudgingly accepted him.

Brezhnev was relieved. At last a 'krepki khozyain', a strong leader was firmly in place in Kabul. Taraki explained in simple terms that the Afghans were primarily warriors, fighters, thieves and murderers. He assured his foreign neighbour he would do the job, uniting the country and exorcising any alien intrusions. The murderous methods used by Taraki appealed to Brezhnev's alter ego. The Supreme Soviet had pushed for the acceptance of Taraki's methods and his single minded ability to gain the respect of the tribes. These were the concrete foundations upon which he would mould the country into a socialist unity of strength. But when the Shah was driven from Iran local insurgencies multiplied in violence and paramilitary acts of sabotage targeted against the new people's republic.

Taraki mounted his homicidal raids against Karmal's friends and allies. Naturally opposition against him escalated. Brezhnev sought it necessary to angle for an alternative solution and told his aides to stop worrying. They were becoming an unnecessary distraction.

Taraki confronted Brezhnev blatantly by stating his people had always been a boisterous lot. It was in so many ways the braying of donkeys to get the most attention by a noisy demonstration of power. Brezhnev decided then and there to push him a little informing the leader that his insurgents were gaining real power in his country. He

reminded Taraki how the Soviet people had given so unselfishly the aid he needed to maintain his armed forces who seemed to be doing very little in return. And Amin his deputy was doing even less except maybe line his pockets and buy himself a few rebel leaders. Even the Soviet friends his country welcomed, for they had come with peaceful intentions were no longer safe from rebel outrages. The Soviet people he sternly reminded Taraki who had no wish to embroil themselves in his internal conflicts were becoming disillusioned, demanding direct action from authoritative leaders to maintain the peace. These criminal elements were causing the Politburo great concern.

“We have the cities. The bedouin are nothing.” Taraki had dismissed with a sleight of hand. “When they become bored they make trouble and disperse as quickly as they had gathered together. At the moment they are a little excited because of the Iranian revolution. It will wither in the sun and their enthusiasm drift like dust in the desert. I tolerate them but I must also be firm. If I do not show any ruthlessness, my commitment, my strength,” he continued in the same breath, “then our people and the Pathans across the border will not show me any respect. It is then that the problems you so fear will really escalate. It could even drawn Pakistan into the fray especially now that they have a military dictatorship securely in place.” Allowing the implication to hang in the air.

“Pakistan,” Brezhnev countered, “will be no problem. The Americans have withdrawn much of their aid. Your army is rapidly being modernised and your borders are inviolate. We will stand by our treaty. The people of the Soviet Union stand behind you and your government. But the excesses concern us. We are neighbours so let peace and prosperity flourish within your land and between our two illustrious nations. Our futures have much in common.”

They both then rose, the meeting adjourned. Entering the ornate hallway the two

leaders made a joint statement under the flashing cameras of eastern bloc journalists. Taraki returned to Kabul and Brezhnev to his office where Andropov awaited his leader's summons.

Showing him a blue file, top secret, single copy only. Slowly Brezhnev sat down behind his wide empty desk. Slowly he read the report. It looked as if Amin was becoming the next strong man. His following was steadily increasing. He had their Foreign Ministry and more importantly their Department of the Interior on his side, or at least in his pocket. The armed forces were dissatisfied because of the dirty work they had literally to execute. It was not worthy of soldiers to fight and kill their brothers. Amin claimed he could contain the insurgents who had nothing in common with the Iranian revolution.

Andropov though warned Brezhnev that Amin had been educated in the United States. That made him a likely CIA operative. He was known to be a smooth talker, had firm friends and allies of dubious import to back him. The people were beginning to consolidate behind Amin. His potential power was a threat to Taraki. And if Amin did manage to ride out the current wave of unrest he certainly would emerge as their next leader. The danger here lay in his western and anti socialist leanings. It was certain he would open the country to capitalist economies and their political ideology. On the basis of this analysis Andropov pushed for the installation of Karmal.

Brezhnev thought about the report for a few long minutes. "So you still want Karmal." He said quietly. "You know he would cause even more trouble for us. The people regard him as an extension of the current status quo."

"No comrade. New blood is needed. We cannot afford a war so close to us. Amin it is true wants power. He is cunning and he is intelligent, something Taraki lacks. And

he is dangerous. Karmal is not. Taraki is cunning, useful at times but he is expendable. And we know now Taraki cannot handle the situation as his aide Amin can. He is the logical choice.” Andropov persisted pointing out that Amin would steer Afghanistan towards the west and they would lose their fragile economic grip now slowly coming to take on definite form as their plan assumed its coherent objective.

Yet Amin, like so many Asian leaders was playing everybody off. They would lose a lot of friends and Soviet planning would be plunged back by ten years easily Brezhnev conceded.

“It would be Daoud all over again.” Andropov predicted.

But Brezhnev with the tacit approval of various departments had made up his mind. “For all of Taraki’s modesty and charm he is weak and the whole country is in revolt. Cable Kabul, top secret. General Ivan Pavlovski, head of GRU. ‘Taraki to step down. Stop. Amin to replace him. Stop. Notify Amin and dispense with Taraki. Stop. Signed etc.’” Andropov understood.

“The reasons are obvious.” Brezhnev continued. “Taraki has lost too much power and prestige to Amin already. In Afghan terms it is his end. These people have no real political loyalties. Nor does the army follow orders any more. The military governors are keeping aloof, biding their time. Taraki to counteract the actions of his political follies kills all those he can and indiscriminately at that. It is this which makes him so dangerous. He is allowing the country to revert to civil war. In neighbouring Baluchistan, in Waziristan, the Uzbeks would fall over the exposed cities creating a situation we would not be able to control or contain, especially with the current Shi’ite revival. The politburo agrees that Amin must be the next leader. Please make your arrangements with General Pavlovski as he has orders to stay in Afghanistan to look after your wet affairs.

Taraki is creating as much anarchy as he can so he can consolidate his own forces and build up his empire like Pol Pot. And,” Brezhnev added good humouredly, “we must push Taraki out. Anyway we have Karmal who is with us in any case.” He added cryptically.

But Andropov was ill at ease. He wanted and preferred Afghanistan to be in his domain, not the GRU’s and said so. But the Supreme Soviet leader was adamant.

“This is the decision of the Supreme Soviet Council and the Politburo. There is no argument about our aims. It is the method which is crucial. With Marshal Ogarkov and Admiral Gorshikov’s plans to put pressure on the Persian Gulf and aid both Iraq and Syria means our capture of Kabul is essential if only to complete the chain. It might even help neutralise India and put Jordan off side with the United States. Then the rest of the Arab world will follow the established lead we have set. Remember it is I who has the final jurisdiction over this. Keep Pavlovski informed and no one else except your Colonel Dubrov. Pavlovski will tell the ambassador in Kabul what he needs to know for the moment. That is all.”

Taraki upon his return to Kabul became embroiled in a factional fight with Amin and was duly liquidated. That had been in September. Winter was approaching.

Ponoramev’s dark eyes watched Kliment Vasily Utyosov, the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan who had been ordered to fly immediately to Moscow upon Brezhnev’s orders. Commands such as this were usually ominous and Kliment had plenty of those in Kabul. The local administration there was loosing its grip in the countryside to the counter insurgents. Any attempts to rectify the situation militarily did nothing to change this sorry state of affairs. To be then called back so abruptly was bad enough, but to be

driven straight from the airport to the Lubyanka was less than encouraging. But then again he told himself there were other problems to consider like the abduction and imprisonment of two of their agents in the northern mountains. A delicate situation.

And his masters had kept him in the dark. There was nothing unusual in that itself. He felt in this regard reasonably secure. In fact given the circumstances he could not have helped those agents as they had not even entered the country. Well the deed was done and the Afghanis who held them were only too aware of their advantage. Now it was up to him to stall the release of their hapless prisoners. He looked at Ponoramev, a man more cunning than a fox and more deadly than their SS 20's stationed in Eastern Europe.

"Allow me to introduce Colonel Dubrov," Levich his minder began. They nodded. "Marshal Ogarkov, Admiral Gorshikov, Marshal Zhikov and comrade Ponoramev." It was an assembly of the elite. Well placed, respected, maybe even feared but all military stars rising under the stagnant leadership of Brezhnev. Was this to be another 1953? Levich poured him a generous glass of vodka accompanied by a small cup of strong black coffee. Levich bowed to the assembly then left the room. Utyosov was amongst a group of impassive yet dangerous men.

Ponoramev allowed himself a smile, his bald head shiny under the crystal lamps breaking the ice by saying, "You wonder why we have called you here ambassador." Utyosov decided to remain silent. Ponoramev's very presence surprised him. Something was up.

Ponoramev he knew was the International Department, an old surviving legacy of Lenin's. Its aim was to spread the message and deed of communism to all the world's countries 'without exception'. In those heady days it had been known as Cominform and



later in 1956 was reorganised, its modes of operation streamlined. He recalled how the ID had managed under Ponoramev to attract the outstanding thinker Mikhael Suslov one of the country's leading international ideologist who, with Ponoramev directed its policy. Under their careful scrutiny and guidance the Soviet Foreign Ministry had become their rubber stamp. Poor old Gromyko. The ID even ordered their hatched plans to be executed by both the KGB and the GRU. The ID's aim was of course through orthodox forms and respectable diplomatic channels, or failing that by terrorist means to attain the capricious philosophy of the Lenin Institute. The world was indeed their oyster.

There in the scheme of things each non communist country had an affiliated section at the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University. In truth the ID in its way ran amongst other things the World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Peace Council and its umbrella organisations of sundry bodies such as the new and fast growing western anti nuclear movements. They had been brilliantly conceived as overt cover groups. Thus the pseudo democratic expressions of peace loving peoples, thanks to the grumbling dissatisfaction of western academics and left wing journalists were furthering the advance of Moscow's ideological warfare with the west.

But what did they want with him? He dared not guess. Dubrov looked his usual relaxed self, even impassive. What surprised him most was that Ponoramev rose to leave, returning he said to the Lenin Institute to hatch more intriguing plots to advance the irresistible expansion of the ID's aim of infiltrating non aligned spheres of their shrinking world.

The atmosphere inside the ornately furnished room was as bleak as the autumn weather outside. Such a change from the deep clarity of Afghanistan's open skies. Admiral Gorshikov also rose, bowed slightly with age. He smiled at his friend Marshal

Ogarkov and followed Ponoramev saying this meeting had little to do with his own operations. 'I bet.' Thought Utyosov. He was only here as an afterthought.

Dubrov strangely enough began: "Comrades. There has been a most unfortunate turn of events in Afghanistan. We have just had a meeting with the ID. Ponoramev is taking a personal interest in what will be revealed to you. I may add that the decision reached so far has the approval and endorsement of the Defence Council, the Collegium of the Defence Ministry and of course Brezhnev himself." He breathed heavily, the weather outside turning even darker. When the meeting was finally over Utyosov's hunch about the Politburo's Asian aims were confirmed.

Later that day Marshall Levich had appeared and accompanied Utyosov back to the airport where a military flight was ready for their return to Kabul. The plane was cleared for takeoff and disappeared amongst the grey rain laden clouds. Inside the plane was crammed with electronic surveillance gear. The only other passengers apart from him and Levich were two aids, Shushkin and Stanislaw, the latter their chief negotiator. He was by necessity needed for the release of their abducted citizens.

Utyosov had been taken into the confidence of his peers. And he had inwardly gasped at their audacious plan. It was a daring and calculated plot against which the west could do absolutely nothing. If the bourgeoisie powers were so blind as not to see the writing on the wall, well then, he admitted Soviet boldness had to be decisive. Taking guts and determination,, something the west was currently lacking. They were still smarting from their failure in Vietnam. Yet as a diplomat he was concerned. It had dangerous and volatile implications. But as Marshal Ogarkov said this plan was the logical thing to do. Let the western powers dither, let them talk and call their time

consuming conferences. He certainly would not rest until they had acted and aided the embattled regime in Kabul. The plan was plausible enough to succeed.

Ponoramev representing his department on previous occasions outlined often enough the state of the world. Vietnam was keeping China nicely busy. The Philippines were fast becoming a liability to the United States. Soviet military departments were updating their Far Eastern bases especially now they had Vietnam which gave them far greater surveillance capabilities. That allowed them to penetrate far into the Pacific Basin.

In Western Europe the disillusionment within and without the ranks of NATO, orchestrated by activated sleepers was reaching crisis point. This brainchild had been created back in the fifties by the World Peace Council which poured money and moral aid into the various burgeoning peace movements and anti nuclear lobby groups. NATO was slowly and successfully being fractured. Naturally the WARSAW pact stood firm. Their own protesters were bundled off to labour camps while the East Germans deported theirs to the west under the Helsinki Agreement. Within a generation Western Europe would be so internally divided that backed by the WARSAW Pact's own superior numbers of conventional and nuclear weapons intelligence forecasts indicated they, not the west would be calling the shots.

Things were radically different in Asia. The revival of religion as a political force such as the events in Iran could prove a danger to Socialist Solidarity. Religion, Levich added was the failure of the imagination and the intellect, a reactionary degeneration resulting from a psychologically infantile and weakened mentality. That was why some countries were more backwards and exploited than others. The USSR could not allow such medieval revivals to occur on their doorstep. The Christians and the Jews were

stubborn enough but the belligerence of the Muslims was something else. Ogarkov chimed in stating that they could not allow the events of 1917 to be repeated. Then the Basmachi regiments had violently disrupted their peaceful progress of the civilising influence of Soviet Socialism which had heroically liberated much of Central Asia from its feudal oppressors. Nor could they afford a second Iran which was essentially Shi'ia endangering neighbours like Afghanistan which was essentially Sunni. The Shi'ites were becoming dangerous, gaining increasing powers of influence and upsetting the general and delicate balance south of their border. Afghanistan had to be protected.

Levich and Utyosov continued their chat on the monotonous flight. The plane droned onwards, over the wastes of Turkomania. The Tudeh Party of Iran Utyosov said had been destroyed, its members thrown into the notorious Evin Prison. There general Asadollah Lajendardi reigned supreme. He was typical of the type of leader representing the fundamentalists. Here was a creed medieval in expression and outlook, not unlike the Jews he added who though they hated each other were equally bigoted in their religious racism. At Evin Utyosov confirmed the recalcitrant inmates were being systematically brainwashed into becoming canon fodder for the Ayatollah. This was worse than fascism. Meanwhile Pakistan was militarily stronger under Zia than under the corrupt influence of the Bhutto family. Afghanistan then was caught in the unhealthy upheavals of its surrounding neighbours. If Iran's fervour did spill over her borders, let alone her religious ideology than Afghanistan would truly be in trouble.

The GRU had received reports that a new counter revolutionary force in Afghanistan, the mujahedin were forming into cells, creating pockets of stiff resistance backed by clandestine fighters grouping themselves around various leaders. One of these had formed itself at Boyni Qara near Balkh. The KGB and GRU had thought nothing of

this until the debacle at Peshawar. Then the two agents who had been sent to investigate the root of the problem had been captured by the very rebels they were supposed to have spied upon. The instructions now were for the negotiations to be stalled for as long as possible to given them time to gather more vital and necessary intelligence of that particular group and its environs. The two captured agents, given their expertise and knowledge of Muslim affairs had to be safely extricated. This was their first priority.

A dangerous and potential power vacuum was centred upon Afghanistan. Utyosov added that the people, the bedouins cared little for any government in Kabul. They were more concerned with their grazing lands and their watering rights. The fanatical Muslim elements though had the potential to fire the country into an insurgent slaughterhouse. With their religious zealotry they could unite all under the banner of Islam. Their idea of a Holy War would turn the country into a state of semi barbaric anarchy. It had been proposed that the Soviet government and the Soviet people should strike together with their Afghan allies against the rebels and contain the dangerous infestation. It would gain them at the same time another strategic foothold in central Asia.

Perhaps.

### **Afghanistan**

The two Soviet helicopter gunships lifted off from Kabul airport and headed north west to Balkh. The first carried a handful of shock troops covering the ground ahead of them, acting as aerial body guards. The second carried Abdullah Hanballi, the Afghan minister of the Interior and the two Soviet negotiators, Mikhael Stanislaw and his aide

Ivan Sushkin. To their right the glittering deep blue Banian Lakes placid in their ancient volcanic cones.

Hanballi did not trust Stanislaw who with his crew cut looked even more severe than his rodent faced aide. The Soviet people, their friends had been assured were his staunch allies. Yet, thought Hanballi staunch only to their objectives. Before lifting off the Soviet ambassador himself had tried to appease Hanballi assuring him peace is all they wanted, not bloodshed.

Hanballi was aware of the Spetznatz troops who in Afghan uniforms and speaking the local tongues were busily infiltrating his country. That Stanislaw said, had to be. The sinister innuendo was there, reminding him of the anarchy which reigned outside the cities. They had a duty to protect Soviet interests and the legitimate concerns of the government of Kabul.

The whole world knew the Russian reasoned of the foreign aid paid to counter revolutionary terrorists who were coming so freely into this land aided by both Chinese, American and Arab money. It was the aim of the Soviet government to smoothen the path of liberation for the oppressed Afghan people. For that matter they, the Soviets were courageously fighting for all the oppressed Muslims from the Middle East right through Asia who as one rebelled against the criminal yoke of American imperialism and Zionist aggression. Had not the Israelis propped up the tottering and brutal regime of the Shah in the last few weeks of its doomed political life? To Hanballi all this was so much camel's droppings. His friend Junyad Rissal, the Foreign Minister had informed him just yesterday that Soviet troops were still pouring into the country. Some friends.

Stanislaw insisted their intentions were benevolent. Butter not guns was their aim. Hanballi was certain the man was just another KGB protégé sharpening his teeth in this

land whilst fishing for a promotion back home. Stanislaw indicated that it was really the meddling imperialists who were causing all this bloodshed and suppression of the people.

Like last year Hanballi thought when the Soviets had sent a hit team to assassinate their Prime Minister. Daoud he recalled had made just one mistake. He had not liquidated his sworn enemies and so they had finished him off instead. The communists had been unhappy with Daoud who had continued to maintain strong ties with the west trying to balance the contenders as the grip from Moscow tightened. From inside the jails the communists had pulled off the coup painting Daoud as an instrument of foreign interests who had sold Afghanistan out just as the Shah had sold out Iran. Hanballi had survived the resultant purges by sheer luck having sided with the right faction at the time. But by then there were only two sides left. One was led by Noor Mohammed Taraki and his Khalq Party and the other the communists lead by Karmal's Parcham Faction. And Karmal as everybody knew was in the pay of the KGB. This amazingly the Americans dismissed as emotional hysteria.

Taraki, now dead had instigated his own coup last year. Savage by temperament, his round face appeared jovial enough whenever he met anybody of importance. But he had no feelings for political complexities and was too easily influenced by the strong men he kept around him most of the time. For a while the tribes cooled off respecting his show of strength. The Soviets poured in the roubles to bolster the military and with their own personnel in place retrained the Afghan army. At the same time they cut the country off from the western world. When the people grumbled the Soviets warned them of Lebanon's fate. Here was an example of imperialist and capitalist intrusion they boldly exclaimed.

But then the roof had fallen in and if both Rissala and Hanballi had not been on such good terms with the Uzbek and Pathan tribes they surely would have gone under the knife. It was fortuitous at the time that they had been friends with Shuja's people. For the moment their lives and their freedom were guaranteed.

It had all begun with Taraki shipping Karmal as Afghanistan's minister off to Prague. There the Soviets kept a good eye on him. Then Taraki set about the liquidation of Karmal's supporters. This drew criticism from both Hanballi and Rissala which later on guaranteed their survival. They both increased their ties with the Pathans and soon clandestine meetings were a regular part of their political activities. Balkh was a fairly serene area and most of the rebellious reprisals occurred elsewhere, partly due to the fact that there was an intense rivalry amongst the various clans. This pleased Shuja. It kept the heat off him, his people, his area.

While Karmal's friends were being incarcerated or being murdered the Soviets did nothing. Karmal fumed. Had he stayed in Afghanistan the peace loving Soviets would certainly have entered and restored the status quo in their own way. This would have plunged the country into a civil war something the Soviets never discounted. Rissala and Hanballi had worked furiously to avert that threat and managed to pull it off. But in March the lid blew off again. A massive uprising had occurred in Herat inspired by Iran's revolutionary fervour. Taraki with Soviet aid murdered well on twenty thousand people and having tasted blood wanted more. The Soviets saw this not only as a test of strength but also observed how far the people could be driven, what were the limits of their toleration and what the regime could get away with. Opposition continued. So did the slaughter.



Then another contender had arisen. This man, a born diplomat was Hafizullah Amin. Hanballi had already met the man. Amin managed within a few months to become Taraki's wazir. Amin was well educated and cultivated enough to heal the wounds Taraki had opened. Amin assured the Soviets that the Muslim insurgents would eventually subside, that Taraki's strength would be respected and he himself would make sure that the land would be united. More importantly become non aligned. In this way he had a chance. Utyosov once asked him whose side the people were really on and Amin quoted a line from history when a British officer had asked the same question of a Pathan. The malik replied to the officer that they would sit on the mountain tops and watch the various factions fight it out until one faction was defeated. Then they would descend on the vanquished and plunder them to the last mule. Surely Allah was great.

Taraki's murderous oppression did not subside as Amin tried to convince Moscow that the internal fight against Kabul was a natural state of affairs for them. Historically he was right. But in the meantime Amin made his plans. Then rumours were spread that Amin was a CIA spy. It was true that Amin had been educated in the west. So to quell any suspicions Amin arrived one day in Moscow and received Brezhnev's blessings. It seemed the Politburo agreed with Amin that Taraki was becoming too unstable an ally. Amin convinced Brezhnev he would come out on top if a power struggle erupted between them. Nothing happened.

That summer two thousand Afghanis were executed and thirty thousand banished to various military camps. The result was that most of the provinces went over to the rebels. Things were happening so fast that everybody wondered if the Soviets would restore peace by force of arms. Utyosov reassured Rissala that Moscow did not want a war. They had no wish to precipitate the disasters of Stalin. Now the KGB and the GRU

were not happy with the way Brezhnev was handling the situation. Eventually they were proven right. From now on the mullahs agreed that Taraki had to go. The Soviets indicated they preferred Karmal as he had the support of the Parcham Faction. Furthermore he knew Andropov and was the only leader anybody respected only because he had so very little blood on his hands. His time had not yet come.

Stanislaw pretended to sympathise but that was about it.

The small dusty town of Balkh appeared as they descended towards the military base and its small airfield. A few APC's some AA guns and dispersed machine gun nests well sandbagged surrounded the perimeter. The two bloated gunships descended onto the ground in the freezing cold as soldiers with light automatics scoured the area in a tight net of deadly security. Afghan gunships had already surveyed the route to the fort and reported all was clear,

Hanballi stretched his legs hoping to catch some gossip of Shuja's doings before the final flight to the fort. Military personnel were refuelling the helicopters. Stanislaw joined him at a safe distance smoking a mouldy Russian cigarette. Hanballi could see the local commander sauntering over and they both left the Russian to himself. The Afghan commander said the local governor was still a fanatical supporter of Taraki's faction. The only reason he had not shot everybody in sight was due to the fact that he, Hanballi and the Soviet delegation were coming through Balkh. He feared the rebels might take reprisals against them, or him.

"Everybody is happy that Shuja has these two agents. Let us hope the Soviets will pay a high and handsome ransom for this act of banditry. News has also reached me of some foreigners in the hills near Elburz trying to blow something up, saboteurs we think.

They had sophisticated explosives and light arms. It is very disturbing. They are nor your people are they?"

Hanballi shook his head. It was the first time he had heard of it.

"You know I do not listen to anybody in Kabul." Hanballi joked. "No, I know of no foreign mission. Surely they are provocateurs, maybe CIA. They could be anybody." He frowned. It sounded intriguing. "Are they dead?" he guessed.

"Including two of Shuja's men. The bullets were of western manufacture since the Soviets used their own weaponry." His voice trailed off as Stanislaw came over and joined them, greeting the commander with frosty politeness.

"We must keep our eyes and ears open. I'll keep you informed. And now, with your permission I will return to my men. Good luck with your mission. May Allah protect you."

"And you." They embraced each other as they parted.

The captain of the local detachment safeguarding their stopover suggested for security reasons it might be best if the negotiating team split itself into two groups. Stanislaw in one of the ships and Hanballi in the other. Hanballi did not object but the Russian did insisting he would stay with the minister, his aide could take the other helicopter. Hanballi became thoughtful. The spreading out of their team meant something was not right. Stanislaw's resistance to change was enlightening. The Russian it seemed could not cope with a different game plan. It implied a lack of foresight and initiative.

They reboarded the squat gunships. The motors exploded into life, the rotor blades began to churn the frosty air. Dust and flakes of snow swirled around them. The cumbersome machines rose, gained in litheness and sped south towards the jagged brown and white capped mountains.

They flew at a safe though minimal height, skirting over the rising valleys as a precaution against ground fire. At speeds such as this and at such a low altitude it would be extremely difficult to bring down anything as heavily armoured and armed as they were. Hanballi and Stanislaw maintained an indifferent silence.

They flew over the wintry desolation when suddenly Hanballi heard a dull thud in front of them. He stared speechlessly, the soldiers ready in an instant with their machine guns. The leading helicopter was billowing out thick smoke, orange flames lashing from the gunports as the machine for a few seconds spun dizzily onwards. Some of the men had been thrown out by the explosion. Small flaming dots falling towards the ground. Pieces of shrapnel were discarded in all directions and a gaping hole of twisted burning material lit up the wobbling gunship. The wrecked helicopter spiralled downwards leaving behind a thick trail of oily smoke. He could see someone dangling from the rocket pod, his face a carnage of smeared dirty blood. The machine hit the ground nose first, skidded along an embankment as if pushing itself into the hill. Pieces of metal sheared off littering the countryside. The fuel tanks exploded in a brilliant orange ball of flame, the dark mushroom shaped cloud billowing upwards. The ammunition detonated fireworks whizzed about the wreck followed by several more explosions as the warheads of the missiles blew up dispersing the still burning chopper over an extensive area.

The pilot was about to circle and return to base when Hanballi ordered him to keep flying towards their objective. He argued that to swing around would expose their underside to any ground fire lurking down there for he thought the gunship had been hit from below. The pilot radioed for instructions. Balkh equivocal saying they had no jurisdiction, they could contact Kabul. Kabul told them to continue the mission. The war had arrived for the Russians.

Stanislaw accused the captain at Balkh of treachery. Hanballi assured him the contrary was the case. The Russian Hanballi reminded him was ignorant of local politics. If anything this had been a warning from the rebels directed at the Soviets and their illegal intrusion and trespass into this land. Their infiltrators and unwelcome advisors, their silently arriving soldiers were now the enemy.

Stanislaw was convinced the helicopter had been brought down by a bomb which also meant him. But Hanballi had to admire the Russian who never lost his composure. Yet by the invectives he threw around the man had been rattled. Obviously the point was made by the rebels and extremely well at that. Whoever had planned this daring act of sabotage was undoubtedly well trained. Maybe it was a Soviet act of subterfuge encouraging Kabul to declare the province a state of military emergency and allow the Soviets a free hand to clean out the rebels. If so it would pull the country into a terrible bloodbath thoroughly embroiling the land in a protracted guerrilla war. More likely it indicated that Shuja and his commander Serinda had united the mullahs who themselves were busily moulding the various tribes into an efficient fighting force.

Hanballi hoped they were consolidating the peoples of the Kush, of southern Pamir and hopefully the Uzbeks who stretched right into the Soviet Union. If they could achieve that then this area would become impregnable. One word from any of their leaders and the resultant jihad would sweep away the foreign interlopers.

Upon arrival at the fort the Russian was led into a guestroom. Once seated their host began to serve the bitter sweet tea from a huge brass samovar. Hanballi was comfortable enough to relax amongst his people but obviously Stanislaw without his aide was not. Their single remaining helicopter had landed outside the fort's perimeter now

guarded by only two remaining Afghan soldiers sent with the mission. The Spetznatz troops dead.

Hanballi was aware that Serinda was also unhappy concerning the sabotage. He was making enquiries sending out messengers to discover who actually had executed this plan, this strike back. He too toyed with the idea that this could very well have been a Soviet ploy. They would then achieve their aim by what appeared to be a legitimate means of self defence, stressing of course the need to increase internal security which meant more occupying troops. If anything the Soviets wanted Afghanistan under siege.

Serinda opened the negotiations in English by stating, as they drank their tea that he could have had the captured spies shot for trespassing, for disturbing the peace and for being murderers. He said he had to restrain his men from not shooting them in revenge for the assassination of Muhammed and Akbar. May Allah have mercy on their souls.

Stanislaw remained immune. His face expressionless. He countered Serinda by saying they were encouraging acts of sabotage which his agents had so heroically prevented. Serinda cut him short by demanding a million each for them in American dollars. Stanislaw laughed saying they had killed four of his nationals in Peshawar and as such were criminals, bandits exploiting the people. Serinda ignored the taunt and simply offered Stanislaw extra time to contact his superiors and relay their demands.

The only thing they did agree on was to have lunch. Sweetmeats were served with saffron rice and more black tea. The hookah after the repast was finished was placed on the table. Serinda, Hanballi and a chief by the name of Ibn-al-Marabi delighted themselves with jokes at the expense of the ferenghi.

A messenger arrived as they were smoking genially. It was Mustafa ibn-Rassid, the chief of the northern tribes of Balkh. He only pretended to be a messenger. Serinda

was organising with Rassid's a council of war, the respective leaders discretely gathering under the noses of the Soviets. Rassid knew some Russian. His family had traded with them for so many generations he could not remember when they had not. Rassid had also retrieved an attaché case from the stricken helicopter which had belonged to Stanislaw's aide which he proudly displayed to the assembled men. The faces of the Afghanis turned ugly as Rassid read out some more of the salient and nasty objectives the Soviets had in mind. Things did not look good for Stanislaw.

The latter insisted it was the rebels who had carried out the assassination of their scientists who were nothing but innocent Soviet civilians. Furthermore he considered the action of capturing their observers, invited by their own government in Kabul to be an act of war. The whole province he insisted should by all rights be declared a military zone except that the Soviet people were patient and wanted only to bond the two great nations with their friendship.

The negotiations continued for several hours. Finally Serinda rose and said: "You are our guest and under our protection. This creates an obligation for us. We cannot allow you to be endangered in any way. You are far too important a person. You have eaten with us and I am obliged to do all I can to protect your person. In this way no harm will come to you. Inform your masters you are staying here within the safety of the fort. And don't forget the two million American dollars." He smiled innocently.

Stanislaw went out to the helicopter to relay Serinda's message. The radio crackled and hissed as he was patched through to his embassy in Kabul. They told him to hang in there but as far as the ransom went, forget it. Replacing the handset he found himself surrounded by the locals, most carrying ancient firearms. It seemed he too had

become their prisoner and another hostage at that. It dawned on him he might have flown into a trap.

Serinda paced the earthen floor, his face furrowed by disturbing thoughts. Tuqlaq twirled his thick moustache sitting laconically sipping his tea, serenely smoking the hookah with the others. He knew Serinda would say all that was necessary without any prompting by the others so he puffed and waited. The Soviets were keeping them all occupied with their incursions into this still free land. Kufi confirmed that Uzbek Soviets were infiltrating the Afghan army.

“Yes I expected as much.” Serinda replied. Usually rock calm in the most violent and adverse of situations he was rarely as apprehensive and agitated as he was today. When the country had risen to a man last year against the Soviet murderers in Herat Serinda had shown more sense than anybody else. Rassid the khan of Balkh inspired by the ideals of jihad would have blown all the foreigner’s heads off, dying in glory as a proven martyr. Serinda had managed to soothe his self destructive enthusiasm. He was almost certain that it must have been Rassid who had sabotaged the helicopter. It would cause more trouble than was necessary for as Rassid insisted martyrs were assured a place in paradise. Such actions to him no matter how clumsy or self defeating were more like articles of faith. Now Serinda had to think hard and fast.

“How many soldiers are with the remaining helicopter?” Tuqlaq asked.

“Two.” Serinda answered abstractly still pacing the floor.

“I don’t know. Definitely not hostile but I do not know which tribe or clan. What is on your mind?”



“Take their helicopter as another prize of war.” Tuqlaq said from behind the hookah’s volumous clouds of smoke. Such schemes were typical of him and this one sounded mad enough to be plausible.

“And then?”

“We take the governor, destroy his residence which doubles as a listening post. The Soviets are using it to gather intelligence about us.”

It would also give Rassid something to do Serinda agreed. “He is going out of his mind waiting for Shuja to start his plan.”

“Rassid can take the army base.” Tuqlaq continued merrily, “And we take the governors place. With the helicopter this attack should be easily accomplished. Allah willing.”

“By the prophet’s beard you will bring in the Soviet army.”

“The way things are going I think they are already here. Something must be done.”

“The Russians will go mad. They will attack en masse. This will be another Herat.” Serinda warned.

“If the two soldiers and the pilot will go along with us it will be no problem.” Tuqlaq said with confidence.

Serinda still had not sat down. It sounded good enough to work. If they, he, did not act soon then their respect and their power would be eroded. The clans and various tribes would become wary if they did nothing.

“Tell Rassid this.” Serinda had come to a decision. “We will let him know when we have the helicopter so that we can begin to plan the overall attack.” Yet Serinda remained cautious and did not share the overall confidence of Tuqlaq.

“By the way Serinda, the chopper is carrying missiles.”

“Indeed?” Serinda beamed. Maybe things were looking good after all.

Mustafa-bin-Rassid was an impatient man and like his forefathers was just as cunning and as treacherous. He came from a noble family for his worthy predecessors had battled against the British in Gilgit and Swat in general. After the creation of the Russo-British Vakhn Strip neutralising the frictions between the two colonial powers peace had come to the Hindu Kush. But it was only a peace the foreigners enjoyed. Rassid’s people had thus been isolated from their land in the Pamir and were forced to move west, ironically to the land of their origins, southern Uzbekistan. By the early twenties Lenin had appeared sympathetic to the local khans with promises of autonomy and independence through various established Muslim councils. But with Stalin’s creation of the Central Asian Department the Soviets had returned to their usual methods of murderous repression. After the Kokand massacre in which Mustafa’s grandfather had been slain along with the other ten thousand people the Russians were, to him from then on his arch enemies. They were infidels against whom an eternal jihad was to be waged.

During those desperate times when his family struggled against the tyrannical Bolsheviks they had met the great leaders of resistance: Togan, Enver Pasha and the mercurial Bek. Enver had pretended to aid the Soviets but was fighting with the Afghans instead. But then the Emir of Afghanistan intervened and persuaded Bek to release Enver. Joining his father they then planned and executed many successful raids and sorties into Russia until their ultimate defeat at the hands of the Red Army. Unfortunately their demise was partially due to the fact that Bek had been jealous of their success which was

embarrassing him. Rassid's father had been betrayed, captured in 1931 and subsequently shot.

Naturally Rassid retained his hatred of the Russians. Then came the Second World War. The Kasmach Rebels reorganised. During that time nearly half the Central Soviet Asian Army defected or simply melted away into the mountains. And whilst the Soviet Union struggled against Germany their cause suffered. Whilst the Germans gave them aid in the form of firepower and ammunition the rapid German advance into western Russia created a new industrial revolution in their ancient homelands as endangered Soviet factories were relocated further east. After the war their culture was urbanised, modernised, sanitised and then wiped out through Moscow's programme of nationalised Russianisation. Their alphabet and calligraphy was banned, their holy leaders jailed or executed, their wisdom and knowledge once the jewel of Islam ignored and despised as they were buried under the cultural onslaught of Soviet socialism. Their hatred of all things Russian never abated.

By now Rassid had become the head of his people. Under Daoud Afghanistan had become another sovietised satellite state as worldly events took new turns. After the toppling of the Shah of Iran his own people regained their hope of independence and freedom. The Soviets in turn made new overtures yet it was premature to think they meant what they said or promised his country. Events subsequently instigated by Moscow left Rassid with only one way out: to declare Holy War upon them after the massacre at Heart.

Shuja and Serinda were well aware of Rassid's predicament. They had worked hard to consolidate the resistance movement amongst the various northern tribes. Rassid joined thinking the old raids would begin once again. Instead Shuja and Serinda managed

to convert the mullahs to an acquiescence of the political status quo implementing a truce. They promised to deliver a far greater blow against the Soviets than Rassid could even imagine.

Antiquated hit and run raids were a thing of the past. Times had changed and the capabilities of modern armies were not the same as those of his forefathers. New weapons were constantly entering the field. New methods of fighting were needed which Shuja claimed he had. Grudgingly Rassid agreed to lay low. Serinda wished to create the illusion for the Soviets of an impression of peace and with that a false sense of security. Then and only then would it be time to strike the blow against the foreign invaders. To destroy them in one mighty swipe, an impelling calamity strong enough to drive them from their lands forever.

Serinda promised this winter he would begin the campaign and take the fight right to the Soviets. Well winter was approaching and the only strikes that were carried out occurred in the western and southern provinces. Then as luck would have it Rassid learnt of some real Soviets who had crawled out of the dung of camel's excreta. Rassid would destroy them. But because Hanballi was travelling in one of the helicopters he had only blown the other out of the sky by planting a delayed time bomb in the machine as it was being refuelled. Rassid was satisfied for the moment.

Today their mullah Abdullah Jahal-al-Kufi was coming. Serinda's messenger had informed the man of their plan. Rassid was so overjoyed he had wept tears of thanks during his prayer session.

The council of war Serinda called was noisy with exuberance. Black battle flags were handed out to the gathered leaders and scouts had promptly left to alert the local

population of the coming event. The government soldiers were either expected to fire into the air or to vanish into the night. And they would have a helicopter to spearhead the attack. Allah be praised. Tonight they would ride. Prior to the combined assault many of the men took to the hills to make vows upon the graves of holy men buried under mounds where they left strips of paper upon which they wrote sacred messages and supplications to Allah.

Serinda returned to the fort after his sojourn in the hills. He picked half a dozen men and dawdled over to the helicopter. The two Afghan soldiers and pilot told him to stop where they were. By their accent Serinda knew at once they were Afridies from the Khyber. He knew the Afridies made their living from plundering caravans or extorting protection money from passing travellers. They would fight only as a last resort preferring rather to bargain their way into a favourable position over their opponents. Not that they were cowards but simply more cunning than their brethren in arms.

Serinda had the sun behind him as the soldiers were immersed in the fading glow of the brisk winter's day. A light powdered snow lay around them. He walked up to them and simply told them that it had been his men who had knocked out the other Soviet gunship. Not that that was the case. They ruled this area and had hostages to prove it. The infidels Serinda underlined were putrid abortions of diseased pig's bladders who had to be taught a lesson. At this the soldiers laughed, insults against the infidels they always welcomed and enjoyed. Serinda stated plainly that it was the intentions of the Soviets to have Muslim fight Muslim and Afghani against Afghani. Once the divisions were entrenched the Soviets would invade, rape the women and plunder their wealth. And they the Afridies would be hardest hit because they lived along the most important road in the

land. That too was not quite true. The Soviets would declare war upon them as they had declared war upon the people of Herat. They all remembered Herat.

Upstairs in a small room built into the fortress wall Hanballi was keeping Stanislaw company. Hanballi sometimes a consummate actor gave the impression of being as much a victim of Serinda as was the Russian. But Stanislaw's mood was turning ugly. A metallic whine and a burst of the helicopter's rotor blades created the fury within Stanislaw which Serinda, downstairs, desired. It was not going anywhere. Just a reminder of who was on command here.

"According to the military codes of honour I demand..." Stanislaw exploded but was cut off.

"Are we at war then to declare military codes? You are our guest invited by our country. You have come in peace. The threat of arms, the threat of force does not do justice to your status." Tuqlaq finished off as he entered the small room having come to see how they were getting along. Hanballi enjoyed Tuqlaq's company, his face calm, non-challant. Stanislaw looked out of his depth, his fierce blue eyes flashing daggers. The engine outside was switched off. This little diversion had unsettled the Russian. He protested against the repeated abduction of his fellow citizens and the subsequent misuse of the property of his government.

"I thought the property of the government was the property of the people." Tuqlaq said steadfastly. Stanislaw eyeballed Hanballi who stood there indifferently. Stanislaw warned Hanballi that this conspiracy would not go unnoticed. But his outburst was ignored.

"We cannot have that happening." Hanballi said icily and pulled out a pistol. Stanislaw turned even paler than he was and before he could do anything about it

Hanballi pumped two bullets into the Russian who staggered backwards into the mud wall, mouth open in disbelief as if to protest. But words failed him. His eyes stared in incredulity as he sank slowly down the wall leaving a nasty red smear, his last comment it seemed. The two men picked up the body and swung it through the open window. The lumpy inert mass fell to the ground and bounced a little in the soft crisp snow leaving a red indentation upon the pristine white ground. Below the men cheered. The two Afridie soldiers and the pilot decided, getting the hint, to join Serinda's rebels. They were instantly welcomed as fellow brothers fighting the invaders.

The leaders preparing the final assault upon the Soviet manned garrison at Balkh called one last meeting. Serinda informed them the local militia had been alerted and they would offer no resistance. The fort here was to be evacuated over the next few days. They were all to split up immediately after the raid and make their way to safer compounds and forts further west and south. A skeleton force would man this fort to let the Soviets think nothing was going on. The women were busy preparing food for both the assault teams and the evacuating families. By sunset the men were riding out heading north.

The Soviets meanwhile were not expecting any further communications from their negotiators since Serinda knew of their plans to stall the talks for as long as possible. It was what the Soviets expected in Kabul.

Where they were joyfully rubbing their hands, itchy from waiting with suppressed exhilaration. Their plan was working without a hitch. Soon they would have enough information to take out the rebels at Balkh, a strategically placed province nestled between the mountains separating the motherland from Kabul.

## Vahnsin

A dark intelligence had coursed through Bahunm's dream laden mind. But awake, seeing the dew encrusted valley he tried to remember its vagarious import but could not nail it down. Something to do with an invasion, an alien time asserting itself into if not onto this universe. A tenebrous grasp extending from the mandala's dark thralldom.

Bahnum welcomed the fresh morning air of the forest. His horse, Ram was grazing noisily, choosing its grass. The first thing, he had been asleep, was a grey robed priest standing there watching him from a distance. Clumsily Bahnum watched.

The figure moved closer. "We have expected you for some time now and receive you into our protection." The sage looking man announced. "Please follow me."

Bahnum took Ram by the lead and followed the robed one into the tangled undergrowth. The trees were densely packed, twisted and gnarled covered by thick lush vines reaching for the upper canopy and light. Around them scuttled startled rodents. The cool air under the cloak of the entwined forest refreshed Bahnum and kept at bay the rising heat of the morning sun. At last they reached higher ground and a cave.

"Your mount will be safe here as we are for I have willed an image which hides this place from the idle and the curious and naturally our enemies." The sage putting him at ease, motioning Bahnum into the pleasantly cool chamber. A breeze was coming from within, the air fresh, invigorating.

"First you must eat, refresh yourself. Then there are two people you will meet. Come, I have prepared a repast, the ingredients grown in my own garden."



Bahnum thanked his host and ate the proffered cooked vegetables. The spices were familiar yet he could not place them. Having finished his host brought him a jug of water to slake his thirst. Bahnum recited a quick prayer of thanks for the protection his host offered.

The sage asked him to follow once more. Away from the cave they came to a clearing where he saw a raised dais upon which burned a blindingly white fire. To one side sat two shrouded figures. As he came closer he noticed one was a woman of advanced age and the other a girl on the verge of puberty. The woman did not rise but introduced herself as Maya, her face divinely radiant.

“And I am Vargen, protector of the Sacred Fire. Please, sit.” Bahnum obeyed. Even the sage’s face looked deceptively young. His skin was smooth and unblemished. His hair white as he too sat with an easy grace. Between them was the girl truly a blossoming spirit. Her almond eyes contrasted her pale skin enhancing her sensuous lips and delicate nose. His heart, even though he was a bombo, missed a few beats.

“I am Devasi,” her clear voice sparkled in the morning air, “servant of the Sacred Fire and with these my guardians we will fight the darkness which infests this land.” She said this with a conviction and a finality which seemed to Bahnum to seem more like an accomplished fact.

He returned their greetings then asked just how they would achieve their common goal: final victory over Zohex.

Vargen explained. “Whenever any of us fought Zohex or his warlords, they, by evil machinations siphoned off our energies, emptied us of our vitality and our determination to overcome this calamity. Many were left a husk of their former self.”

“There is little point in fighting if one cannot win. Especially if one has not the right means at their disposal.” Devasi added.

“Right means?” Bahnum intrigued.

“Yes.” Continued Vargen. “As Lord of the Solar Power I can safely say that the wizard kings of ancient Tellurium, Moerdrum, smaller Thule and now Vahnsin are not quite human. When we fought them time and time again in destroyed Moerdrum they won their victory using the Black Tablet’s Darkness to deceive us. But victory was not given either to them or us. But we did manage to elude Zohex long enough to make good our escape and start once more almost a free people. Over time we managed to isolate the lesser warlords, thus the fall of Moerdrum, by placing the imagery of undeniable mantras around the protagonists. They withered and were then killed off in normal skirmishes. In the long run Zohex was weakened and in an insane mood of revenge Moerdrum collapsed. Zohex became aware of our ruse but was powerless to combat it. So he swore revenge which threatens to engulf us again.”

Bahnum listened, as were Devasi and Maya.

“Zohex and Shaviscara decided to match our subtlety. The chimeras they created even deceived the Elders who thought they had rid themselves of Ahriman’s pestilence. Relaxing the necessary vigilance needed to combat the dark forces they were instead subsumed by this satanic web. Thus Zohex managed the illusion of an idyllic setting which lulled their own senses into a delightful serenity. This in turn convinced the Elders of the essential goodness they thought they had created themselves. If was false for goodness like evil is the creation of sentient beings everywhere and never exists independently of nature. With vigilance dispensed they relaxed. The old knowledge of practical and defensive magic lapsed into silent entombment. They waited. Their occult

tendrils siphoning off the people's life force. In time patient scheming succeeded in draining all efforts of resistance to such a degree that no one could stop the assaults of the wizards who were by now fighting on a higher plane. The tribes, one by one were helplessly subdued."

"So, is there a future?" Bahnum worried at this state of affairs. A higher plane.

"Yes. Nothing lasts forever on this planet. Flushed with victory they, the kings saw no reason to change their ways. Now our enemies became complacent. Khasnesh has already been laid low. Instead of building the sacred structures to tap the vast powers of the universe, Dauthus instead converted that energy into his own vision culminating in a magnificently crafted architectural splendour that is a wonder to the world. Having built his brightly glittering lofty city he fell under its spell, and that of Lethena. She is an occult manifestation, the creation of Shaviscara and the devouring goddess Kali. It was not long before the cycles reached their own lowest realm. That of Ahriman. An opportunist if ever there was one descended by mutual attraction, by the sympathetic conjunction of similar potencies. Moerdrum is now a wasteland of lost dreams and gloried ruins, its remnant population a vacuous psychic aberration, mere fleeting shadows lingering in the night. Shaviscara has hidden himself. What life forms remain will soon be dissipated and reabsorbed into the living web of the cosmos. None need fear the might of Moerdrum again, their own single mindedness destroying that which they had created. They are a power no more."

"One down." Bahnum said. "But what of this Ahriman? Is he not lingering in Moerdrum?"

"No. We believe he has returned to his realm."

"What of the other survivors?"

“They, like the future stand firm. Remember the cycles are changing once again. As such you will not have to confront Zohex directly. The current subservience of the people is a well orchestrated sham coming from Elburz. Zohex thinks them neutralised. But the secret of regeneration, or recharging this ennui was not lost on the Elders. Power will manifest itself when the conditions for it are right. And since Ahriman depleted many souls he now needs another source to fulfil his survival. This gave us the chance to slowly accumulate once more the divine powers for their empyrean inspiration. Ironically it is the same source which Zohex uses, as does Ahriman. And he is drawing upon the powers of Zohex’s race.”

“Would it not be wiser to wait and allow the cycles to finish what Ahriman has set in motion. Since he is feeding of Zohex’s realm...”

“The people’s power will increase as Ahriman depletes his own source through his insatiable cravings. It is true that over time Zohex’s powers will be severely diminished. Then Ahriman will search for a new source. This is the way of all parasites. But if we allow this struggle to continue unchecked then the history of this planet will be one long oscillating battle. Each struggle would reduce ever and anon the power of life until over millennia all life forms would finally be reduced to the primitive quagmire from which they struggled. This cannot be allowed to occur. The Earth would become totally infected with this parasitical sentience, the twisted triumph of Ahriman.”

“And I can help in this vast scheme?” Bahnum asked hopefully.

“Of course.” Vargen answered as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“The solution is simple. With the aid of Elburz we still strike at them from another dimensional level annihilating their fount of power. We will deprive them of their

energies and thus banish Ahriman. And we will establish such conditions where this evil cannot gain a foothold, ever.”

“We disseminate,” Maya added with her gentle voice, “the energies holding together the alienating symphony of their transgressing burdensome world. Be assured their base of operations will sink into oblivion. Remember there will be no need to physically fight this madness. Our enemies will be impotent and we victorious. Elburz is ready.”

To Bahnum it all seemed so easy for them. Vargen in tune with his thoughts.

“It is not through military might but by using the powers already in place that this deed of ours will succeed. Take courage within your own mind. All energy is a condition of space. To think that any of this,” Vargen gestured with a sweep of his arm, “is real in itself is to fall under the very spell by which Ahriman himself exists. We will use sublime methods of penetration to lead ourselves into the realms hidden beneath this play of energy arranged about us. Then the defeat will follow. But I have spoken enough.” Then looking at Maya, Devasi and Bahnum added, “There is much to be done and nothing must be left to chance.”

Bahnum held his breath. He was no closer to the renegade rinpoche, the reason for his presence in this past. But obviously he was enmeshed in their web here. Bahnum decided to go along with Vargen’s plan.

### **Katharis**

For one second and that is all it took Savarna was momentarily ensnared by familiar ancient and abhorrent life forms. They watched her in silence, filling her with fear. She shook them off from their mausolean silence by concentrating on Kali. The release from their mute solitude was instant and once more the golden lights set in the deep vastness of space began to dispense their ethereal elixir into the elements gathered

around her. She felt the overwhelming energies collect into one powerful exaltation. The inherent danger faded as she struggled to free herself from its ice wrenching grip.

She remembered having watched the stars and lifting her gaze saw the glowing stellar lights impress upon her the depths of their presence embroidering the majestic sky above. A warm effusive contentment lulled her senses into a sleepy somnolence now that she had put some distance between herself and the threat of the wizard's contagion. She recollected the living tomb of him who had tried to bury her in his web. But she was somewhere else. Where exactly she could not ascertain.

The mental fog cleared. She was at an entrance of a cave surrounded by thick matted luxurious vegetation. She ventured further out of the carved rock entrance and found her limbs responded with a levity which surprised her. She felt both strengthened and rejuvenated, a traveller in a mirage of which she had taken momentary possession. As she continued forwards into the clearing in front of her she was instantly aware of the surrounding silence. The rustling around her had ceased. The glow of the starlight so richly scattered across the nocturne sky transformed the verdurous flora into ectopic silhouettes suggestive of benign forms of life. The flowers dispersed overwhelming fragrances and the perfumes of heady toxic balms pleasantly assailed her as she breathed with joy the fragrant laden air. The unknown plants virtually salivated their aromatic essences from thick petalled flowers.

A slight figure stood fronting her in the small clearing around the cave. Other familiar shapes emerged from the dense undergrowth, watching her in silence. Were these the sentients she had sensed when she entered their world here? Collecting her wits she found them of small stature, their skin shining black in the night. They were unarmed. Savarna moved and immediately sensed their fear of her. Some scattered into the bush,

others simply fell back, the remainder shook with fear. Did they think her a hallucination, a goddess with blooded and torn limbs hanging about her? She tried to create an image of calm and felt the tension subside. Those who had hidden in the scrub came hesitatingly forward, still apprehensive. Savarna remembered she still had her two serpent guardians who were wound around her, the tongues from their heads flicking nervously about. They then slowly drew back and recoiled themselves with an indifference unique to the animal kingdom.

A single figure moved. He spoke and though Savarna did not expect to understand him the soft pitched sounds had a familiar yet distant and forgotten comprehensibility in them. Could these people be the ancient Dravidians, still gathering fruits, nuts and cereals, still practising their rudimentary animism? If so then they were harmless. Savarna continued to relax. She stepped away from the cave. The Dravidians let her pass then fell into step behind her.

The ground fell back and away from the grotto. The hill was covered with trees, shrubs and overbearing flowers covering the ground in an array of bucolic exuberance. As they followed her along the spongy path bats and birds fluttered above, hunters of the night rustled amongst the undergrowth. Somewhere in the distance a plaintive cry pierced the warm night. Insects hummed in her ears and the croaking of frogs became a racket enough to silence her own thoughts.

Savarna and her companions glid almost noiselessly through the jungle. The path had disappeared but Sarvana decided to follow an animal track instead, vanishing here, re-emerging there. Meandering through the verdigious maze she saw large leaves, succulent ferns, heavily lidded flowers shot through with vibrant colours growing with determination and restless energy. She was acquainted with the night by now and saw



that her entourage were mainly naked, others covered with only crude pleated vegetable matter. Yet they were jubilant, skipping, running and jumping from pure joy now that their sense of danger had passed. Expressions of childlike innocence mounted steadily and she saw the reason for their joy: they were coming to a stockaded village.

Once within its protective barrier Savarna and the villagers were assailed by a jubilant scene of abandonment and revelry. A large fire burned in the centre of an open square surrounded by raised bamboo huts. Many of the participants were shrieking, laughing, weeping and crying in this festive mayhem. Music, totally disjointed in violent clamorous discords added to the cacophony. People were milling about everywhere, staggering, falling, reeling and dancing amongst the din of choreatic sounds accompanied by the noisome clanging, banging and blowing of reed pipes and other assorted instruments.

With her entrance the festival almost ground to a halt until only a few were still staggering drunkenly about. Near her, around a huge earthen pot lay a group of people like discarded baggage. Obviously a strong intoxicating liquor was being consumed by the whole village. It was a bacchanalian frenzy now silent and panting. Savarna could smell the burning fuel of the fire, the sweet aroma rising from the jar of alcohol mingled with the sweat of their bodies. The large fire crackled and hissed, shadows dancing along the walls of the huts. They created a space around her staring in disbelief. The musicians laid down their instruments.

A short stoutly built woman with oversized breasts, protruding stomach and severe buttocks swayed towards her. With bloodshot and bleary eyes she tried never the less to retain some of her composure. Savarna felt her snakes stirring again, watchful of the change around them, mistrustful of the leaping flames. The heavy set woman was

painted in stripes more so on her lower arms and powerful legs, her face chalked in white hiding her human features and supposedly accentuating her sexuality. Except to Savarna she looked more like a derisive parody of her own former self. Apparently she must have asked Savarna where she had come from for some of the people pointed outside towards the hill and the cave. The woman grunted pleased though not exactly overjoyed. The silence became oppressive and she hoped these women here were different to their Greek sisters who tore their favoured victims apart, alive.

One thing was certain. Savarna would have to wait and see whether this was a web spun by Shuja to keep her from her destination. The thought of that memory jolted her for she suddenly became aware of her goal again, to claim the fount of power and with it the mysterious tablet to gain complete ingress of and beyond the intervening abyss. With a sense of repressed urgency these ideas swept through her and subsequently through the people around her. She felt their anxiety mount in unison. The large woman stood stock still, the soft welcoming chantment turning to fear and mistrust. Feeling a new wave of power come over her Savarna had the intuitive insight for a moment that just maybe the fear they so readily experienced was part of the key which she sought. The idea thrilled her. But it also filled her with panic just like the dumb paralysing fear children experienced when they were extremely young. Savarna blanked her mind. It worked. Some of them began to sip their alcoholic beverage whispering amongst themselves. The deformed parody of the head woman suggested Savarna should follow her.

Climbing a bamboo runged ladder she was led into a large raised hall steeped in deep shadow. Here was another sort of silence that seemed to absorb all sound. Adjusting to the lack of light she saw the spectral adumbrations. The woman who had led her here

had already left by another exit. Savarna turned to gaze at the sentients. The reminiscence of the nighted vision at the cave rose once more. But she felt relieved. To Savarna a déjà vu indicated a stable future grasped by her far reaching mind. She was on the right track. Human in form they rested on their heels draped in some reflecting fabric of tarnished light. She decided to approach them, bowing curtly thinking they could be in trance for all she knew.

“You are welcome.” One of them said. “What brings you here?”

“I am searching for a sacred place.” Savarna answered without hesitation staring at the figures seated around a circular and hollowed out hearth in which there seemed to be a dark unfathomable emptiness. She was awed by this limitless centre. None of them had moved since her arrival.

“I am not quite sure at the moment where this place actually is. I seem to have lost my bearings and inadvertently entered your realm.” Her words vanished absorbed into the darkness embracing the hall. Savarna relaxed her vigilance as her hosts seemed to hardly notice her. It caused not the slightest raising of an eyebrow if indeed they had any.

“And you wish to be aided in finding your destination?” One of the beings implanted in her mind. She thought she had seen their lips move but that could have been a trick of the shadowed light in this sepulchral enclosure. Savarna wondered who or what they were. They certainly had little to do with the people whom she had met at the cave’s entrance and in this village. These beings were totally preoccupied with the darkness in front of them.

“Yes.” She replied at last. Here even time stretched itself into another continuum. “It is a place of power.” Whilst watching the black hole which took up so much of their attention. “It is situated amongst northern mountains near a river valley at the outcrop of

a chain of towering rocks which separate the great Asian landmass into two distinct regions. It is upon a western fringe that a citadel exists. Actually there are several of them when I had left but only one contains a temple unto which is etched a well of power reaching into the infinite heavens. But judging by this climate I seem to have come too far south.” They seemed to consider her statement.

“It is dangerous amongst the northern wastes. There is a power, that is true. It is a residue of former times, a burnt out source.” The voice said in her head. Were they bluffing or had she come too late?

“Can you give me guidance?”

Silence.

“Why do you seek this power and for what purpose?” Another voice asked, its timbre betraying a feeling of uselessness in this her search. Savarna had no answer. One took power simply because it was there. Why did one do anything? It was an academic question.

“It is there for the taking.” She answered calmly. It was difficult to explain what they wished to know. The silence absorbed her words. The thick moist air, the tranquil scent of exotic smells spun a heavy supine web of comfort and indifference around her. It would be so easy to simply sit here like these beings and do nothing. For an eternity.

“There is a darkness in the north destroying all forms of life, it is said that it has at its centre in the mountains where ice and snow, sleet and roaring winds kill many before they even reach the accursed place. It is also said a race of beings live there who eagerly devour the energy you speak of. Their presence is like a pestilence on this earth.”

So the ancient race was still there. She had not come too late after all. The voice continued: “Your appearance is a likeness unto them, similar to the ophidian wizards who

resurrect tenebrific derangements with their abominable spells. Have you been sent by them to wreak more destruction on these people and their land?"

"You have trouble then? Invaders?" She felt a slight shift in the atmosphere, a minor anxiety manifest for the merest fraction of time only to be absorbed into the thick silence cocooning them.

"They maraud like beasts. They kill like maddened animals and dominate like hell blasted gods. They are the destroyers edifying their own decadence." Savarna's heart beat faster, her serpents stirred to life as she hung onto her outwardly calm appearance.

"Their urge to dominate is unnatural." Another voice entered. "They know their time is limited so they too crave for what you seek, namely to continue for eternity. They are horrific abominations who stalk and feed upon eagerly devoured forms of life. You wish to possess such power?"

"I wish to take it away from them." She answered coolly. "To take it from this time so that they may become impotent and be subject to the natural process of decay. That is my mission. As for my appearance," she added as an afterthought, "it was necessary to make an entrance that was befitting for the time into which I descended."

"The present is perilous for many." The initial voice re-emerged. "The kings and their attendant priests push their empires further and further south, destroying everything in their wake with their ghastly cravings and derangements few can withstand. Their image is baleful and paralyses both body and soul, but not the mind. And it is the mind that they thus concentrate on with such ferocity. They know exactly what they are doing." Which did not unduly worry Savarna. She had not come here to take lessons in psychology although her husband would have enjoyed this. Wherever his soul was.

“There is not much time left. Omens have already appeared, omens indicating a time of change, a time of catastrophe. The age of dread is upon us all, which your appearance confirms.”

“I understand your concern.” Savarna said dryly. As a stranger in a strange land, as a place lost in time this appeared all too real to her, too natural. But she would not become philosophically entangled with something which had already passed into history.”

“I must reach my goal. If there are others who follow me,” she warned, “then they do not belong with me. I am not the only one in my world with access to your time. Nor had I intended to venture this far south. But I do know given what you have just told me that I must reach this fount, this source before it is too late.” Savarna could feel her mind reeling under the stimulus of her excitement so much so that she felt electric shock waves ripple through her mind and the thick silent air of the hall. It startled these silent human images as the convulsions passed over the dark hearth.

“These people around you are happy to be alive. Happy that the earth nourishes and protects them, that they have children who live to continue the race. They live by what the earth gives them. They had once roamed over this whole continent including the plains which meet the northern mountains. But then came these northern creatures in human form. They brought knowledge, they built cities, they irrigated the land where there had only been soft grassy plains and rich jungles. Then the signs appeared. The weather changed as they played and toyed with nature’s inviolate energies. Crops died and an invisible death stalked and struck down all living beings. With a persistent perversity their vampid decay crept over the land. The manifestations got worse spreading their phantoms amongst even these people here. Yet they flourished as they

vomited forth dreadful beasts, hybrid monsters and mutant beings to do their bidding. Finally they reached even us. They took the women and children for they forced them to breed with their evolutionary perversities and slaughtered those they could not use.” The voice said matter of factly, tired of the events which weighed upon them.

“So you came to seek refuge here.” Savarna finished off.

“Yes.”

“Why not stand up to them?”

“It is not that simple. We ourselves are safe.” Which Savarna felt was true. “It is these people around us who are in danger. If we abandoned them they would soon be no more. We cannot leave them so vulnerable. And they cannot fight nor kill. They cannot even conceive of the idea of resistance. It is foreign to them. They cannot bear any change from that which nature regulates. It becomes a pain for them. They suffer the northern hordes.”

“How odd.” Savarna replied blandly. “Have you tried teaching them the arts of self defence?”

“We have. The idea itself creates such anguish within them that it renders them useless. They freeze, they break down emotionally, fall apart and crawl back into the caves from whence they have so recently emerged. They huddle in dark corners like children and fret over the idea of death. It totally demoralises them.” The voice resounded in her head.

“If they will not defend themselves, they will die.” Savarna said laconically.

“Our presence is enough to keep the northern devils away for they fear us. So long as we live amongst them they are safe.”

“Cannot you teach them to be like yourselves so that they will inspire fear without the need to fight or kill?”

“That is also beyond them. It is simply how they are. These people are completely open to all influences and at one with their environment. In some respect they are completely adapted. But separate them and their mental powers fade to nothing. As things are they merely take what nature provides. The climate is warm and comfortable. Rain, winds and storms in any adverse sense are rare here. There is no sickness, no insanity, they are truly linked to nature.”

“Then they should have no problems.” Savarna interrupted. “I mean if they are so attuned to nature then they could defeat the northern marauders. If they went to the citadel they could absorb the power coming from both earth and heaven and use it as the invaders are using it except they could create patterns of energy made in their own image and annihilate their tormentors by this act of inner transmutation.”

“Such power paralyses them. Murder does something to their minds. There is also the danger that once they start to manipulate power of any sort they will lose the very balance they have achieved with nature. It is the sole basis of their integration. Once the pattern is broken so are they.”

“Can’t they see then they are a lost people?”

“They even believe evil has its limits and that this evil will eventually exhaust itself, vanish and combine with the great nature goddess.”

“Little knowing that the source of the wizards is continuous and eternal.”

“They do not see it in such a way.”



“Then they do have problems.” Savarna mused. “These people are doomed. If they are the Dravidians, or worse, Neanderthals then they will be absorbed by the invading Indo-Germanic Aryans and they will be history. What do you intend to do?”

“We shall confront those occult kings. But we are their antithesis not in any form of innate goodness, merely as an opposite. These marauders are our shadows. We stalk them in their minds, in their actions, casting our own shadows, casting doubts, casting haunted visions, creating their inmost fears. That is why they are in dread of us. At the same time we must protect these people, we cannot allow them to die.”

“But if they have no intention of saving themselves, if they are so weak of mind that virtually suicide is preferential to life,” Savarna feeling exasperated, “that they cannot even see how nature defends and resists death, how all life struggles to survive, then they will bring even you down.”

Silence.

The interview was concluded, the stillness closed about Savarna. The grotesque woman reappeared and led her to a small hut. A comfortable sanctuary for the night.

The Dravidians provided her with a bowl of nuts and fresh fruit placing them near her bed of straw in one corner where there was also an earthen jug of water. She even found fresh woven linen which surprised her. Maybe a clean demon was more benign than a blooded one. She ate some of the proffered food wondering if this impending danger could also threaten her. Was he even a part of this reality? She took off the severed heads and other shrivelled limbs, washed and laid down on the straw matting. The drunken revellers continued their rowdy amusements outside. Exhausted she rested, her two serpents stretched themselves out onto her navel then went hunting.

She felt an issuance approaching, an entity whose presence drifted in and out of her dreams. He belonged to a hunting party but what they hunted she could not discern. Her apprehension rose even though she could not place the danger except the coming presence turned into an electrifying experience. This intensity mounted projecting the threat well into the advancing gloom which preceded him. It was all too strange in the thickening fog around her. The air became oppressively hot, the heat nauseating as a stifling perversion circled about her.

Savarna was bathed in sweat. Her mind was thick, feeling depleted. She feared she might be back in the old world but breathed a sigh of relief when she discovered she was still in her small bamboo hut. Nothing had changed except for the silence. The night devoid of life. The party was over and the revellers obliterated by the toxic beverage had fallen into a blissful drunken sleep. Still her subconscious mind felt the approaching persistence as if someone was on their way.

She rose dressed in her clothes and left the hut. Listening. No sounds at all. No frogs no stalking prey. Silent pitch black night. The stars blighted by clouds, the heat oppressive, unbearable. She walked towards the large hut where the sentients had been. A dark protruding edifice in this stark looming absence of light. Wearily she climbed the bamboo rungs and found the great hall empty. The silence here clung to its space like an overbearing burden, the enigmatic dark hearth gone. Puzzled she descended and walked to the village square.

All around her lay drunken bodies sleeping where they had fallen or passed out from the intoxicating brew. Not a living being moved. Even the guards were dead to the world. She decided to return to the cave fearing here was nothing except a mounting danger. Nighted enmity was invading the village.

Something dark dropped behind her and she reeled around. Nothing. Another form dropped over the stockade but all Savarna saw were the shadows of night etched onto the primitive huts. She saw her two serpents slither back towards her, coil up her legs and make themselves comfortable, extending out from her neck. They were cool and smooth, refreshing and alert.

Then she heard the light plop swiftly scuttling into nocturnal recesses. She stood rooted to the ground, as alert as her pets. Even her serpents felt the change in the air. A loathsome form slithered between the shadows moving towards the gate. Savarna watched in fascination as if her dream was becoming real. She wanted to raise the alarm but all she managed was a muffled croak, the sound of her voice instantly absorbed by the night. Here and there a body moved to get more comfortable. Then she heard the gate slowly creaking as somebody opened it, followed by the sound of horses hooves stamping impatiently upon the soft mossy ground. She saw the nighted shapes flow towards the sleeping bodies, towards her.

A dark figure sat proudly upon his charger wrapped in a coat of lynx, watching her with venomous eyes. The dark shadows she had seen were human similar to the villagers except their eyes were narrow cunning slits. They quickly covered the sleeping villagers with nets. It was a slaving party. Muffled resistance began followed by shrieking tormented struggles. The captives were delivered quick violent blows, brutally bludgeoned into silence. By now the women were screaming, the children howling, the men bellowing in fear as terror spread throughout the village. The small dark shapes continued to flood into the compound. About her were netted writhing bodies accompanied by the clamouring sobs of the women. Savarna heard the sickening crunch of cudgel blows delivered to any who resisted. Madness spun its web of fear around these

stricken people. The small invaders surrounded her though none made a move afraid of her and her hissing wakeful serpents.

“The first to touch me shall die.” Savarna said in icy intonation. The mounted warrior his eyes alight rose in his saddle and whipped a rope around Savarna which the serpents severed with equal agility, the remains falling to the dusty ground. Some of the men made a move from behind; Savarna turned, the serpents struck their fangs into their soft flesh. She waited for the poison to take effect.

The first who had been struck began to howl in excruciating pain. The death bite of her vipers began its work in wasting the second of the would be attackers. Madly screaming blindly rushing about the muscles of the victim began their contracting spasms as his legs buckled under him. His eyes protruded in pained terror, the throat bulged, stifling and choking his screams. The venom paralysed any coordinated muscular movement and the two fell down in a terrific macabre dance of death. Their heads lolled about grotesquely turning purple, thick tongues protruding while Savarna began to laugh heartily. The frantically kicking bodies were by now covered in the slime of their own vomit and excreta, their bowels opened from the spreading poison. The tall warrior moved closer flashing with jewels and amulets worn about his arms, wrists and neck, a tall spear in his left hand and a bow across his back. His fingers had rings upon them, spells of protection. A special glowing amulet hung around his neck. Savarna mocked him with a sardonic smile.

He looked directly at her. “The priests have sent for you.” He said simply expecting his wish to be her command.

“I should be honoured except for your less than regal entrance.” She replied haughtily.

Apathetic to her reply he coolly suggested she mount his steed with him. Savarna recognised she had little choice and so, on a spare horse they rode out of the stricken village. She knew the venom in her serpents could not last indefinitely. Unless they were spectral presences which she has yet not ascertained. Their mere presence impressed her.

Outside were more raiders whom he ordered to transport the struggling booty back to their camp then their citadel. They dragged the netted bundles of terrorised people across the earth. Inserted long poles and heaved them between waiting pack animals. The leader having Savarna behind him spurred on the two horses and they galloped off into the scented forest.

He would not reveal his name for fear of occult retribution. Savarna sensed in him a strange mixture of half animal cunning overlaid by a majestic and almost human forbearing. His arrogance was so natural that she knew it was not the gloss of human weakness but rather the knowledge of a people born to rule, which he bore well.

They rode at a steady pace stopping only to water his horses which flew along so quickly Savarna felt as if they floated over the ground aided by encompassing spirits energising their mounts to greater deeds of exertion. As time passed he became more deferential saying the priests knew of her presence and he had been sent to fetch her. Savarna felt somewhat flattered but wondered how they had known of her being here.

On the second night riding under a silvery moon she asked about his people. He said his race had been in this land for only a few generations having just fought a mighty battle against their old enemies. They had made a truce with their arch rivals. It was an uneasy truce for they wanted to finally destroy the heretics who had broken from the powerful league of their empire. The heretics had forced them to use the great secrets

which had brought upon them such destruction that the heretics fled, coming to this land. His race followed and fought the final battle becoming certain victors. It was while hunting out some of the remaining survivors hidden in the western mountains further north from here that their allies had by chance discovered the Fount of Power. It was then that the transmutations began. Now a strange fever burned incessantly and persistently in their minds.

Savarna's heart missed a beat and she had to calm herself before asking more. It seemed these people were not just yet ready for its power.

The priests he said were vague calling it ancient, having been there before their wizard kings had risen. It had been present even when Chaos ruled the cosmos, the last exudence of a lost nether world. The mad wizard king, Zohex now used it, perverting and corrupting it, allowing its deformity to spread over the continent in scatolous pestilence.

He turned to face her, riding side by side, his jewels still glowing mysteriously, his eyes revealing a touch of eternity mingled with a soul embellished by the infinity of existence. His life appeared as a journey through and beyond time. Just like herself.

Naturally their enemy had an attitude of violent hatred of anything opposed to a strange new god they invented. This god dictated to them how to live and what they could and could not do. Freedom was replaced by a blind acceptance of barbaric primitive laws. This god expected self subjugation, self willed slavery towards their religion, a religion twisted into a decrepit lunacy.

Ahriman she guessed, her serpents certain.

Knowledge was rejected as an all encompassing evil. They predicted their singular deity as the only valid god who for some obscure reason would liberate only them for they were the chosen race.

The fated Turanians.

Then came the surprise.

In the end drastic action had to be taken and a civil war broke out. But by then the island continent was so ravaged that its natural demise was only a matter of time. In the end of course, the heretics lost. Their blasphemous religion had with a morbid finality destroyed not just their enfeebled brains but also a civilisation. To Savarna the story was familiar. It had to be the lost Turanians and their dark god Ahriman, precursor of Yahweh. Postdating Brahma. And here she was, right in the mists of mythology. With the Fount in the possession of this Zohex. It was indeed lucky for her that this unknown proud being had found her for she wondered her chances with this fixated demon king in possession of what she craved. At least if push came to shove his people might be right behind her. Possibilities seemed to open up at the most inopportune of moments. She was indeed fated to execute her will.

They continued to ride through the forest of luminescent plants, past gigantic trunks striking deep their ancient roots into the rich moist soil. Animals fluttered and scrambled amongst the entwined canopy overhead. Putrescent fungi waved about them, huge wet leaves dripped their life essences onto them, the thick sweet smelling liquid itchy once it touched the skin.

Savarna asked what had become of the heretics and he answered that essentially they were finished. Just a surviving splinter group around Zohex, deluded in thinking that their feeble struggle would once again, through their monomania dominate the planet. As far as he was concerned it was over. Eventually they too would be annihilated. He was bored with this tedious episode and Savarna could learn no more. Not that it mattered. The penultimate source was still in reach. Shuja had not won yet. She was here, ahead of

him in time. He was there. So if she gained more access then his end would be less potent. Things were looking good. Her frantic intensity to gain admittance as the sole recipient waned and she relaxed. All in good time.

On the third day the forest was replaced by open grassland. Amongst the tall waving grasses were flowers, the breeze causing rippling patterns. The sky, fleecy clouds drifting along Savarna felt like she had woken from a rich textured dream. A waking sleep which she suspected was due to the sweet aromatic fragrances perspiring from the heavy petalled flowers in the jungle first and less so the forest. And something white dazzling the eye near the distant mountains. A brilliant white city.

Under the crisp blue sky the blazing iridescent metropolis shimmered under the sun. It gleamed gold, silver and electrum. Its walls soaring over the smaller hills around it, capped with white temples, colonnades and balustrades vanishing into interior meandering mazes. A multi dimensionality of odd angles amongst oblique dwelling. Here and there arched bridges of bright marble, soaring spires from whence fluttered gay banners. Public buildings towered high in a profusion of shapes and shadows with ancient broad trees amongst the white marbled architecture. A thin narrow trail threaded its way through a carpet of lush mossy grass meandering towards one of the city's open gates.

He pulled out a pungent winding cloth impregnated with a nauseous smelling substance. Asking Savarna to wind it around her head covering any exposed skin. She did as she was told. The serpents serenely demure. He explained, as vision became shrouded with each wrap around of the long soft absorbent cloth, these grasses through which they were going to ride contained a pollen which when bruised or touched invaded the mind through contact with the skin inserting dangerous visions and paranoid fears. Only



warriors trained such as he could arduously withstand this hallucinogenic attack. That this plant surrounded most of the city was lucky indeed as it became impregnable and those who did succeed to make it to the walled gates were by then hopelessly deranged. As were their war horses. The city he assured her unassailable against any attack by those enemies who had designs upon it. The winding cloth he had finished wrapping lightly around her was soaked in a strong balm, a potent narcotic neutralising any of the psychotropic pollen that might find its way through the pores of her skin and into her mind. The two horses, he had fed, in their chaff bags with the same neutralising plants so they were immune. If ingested the effect could last for weeks.

Savarna's head was swathed in the now sweet smelling cloth. They began to traverse the drugged grassy carpet. She began to feel relaxed, serene and confident in her mission to attain the power within or beyond the abyss. Even if momentarily moving away from the source. The narcotic must have changed her perspective as she bounced and swayed along. Making a stately progress. Then the smell of horses and sweat, the clanking of arms, the jangling of chains, the creaking of carts and noisy people. She surmised they had reached the gates. Then fragrant cooking oils, fresh fruit, human bodies and exotic perfumes, rare oils. Tinkling bells, clops of animals, shouts, laughter, arguments of the bazaar. Snippets of gossip, shuffling hooves, the tramping of feet. Then halted as he took off the winding cloth. In front a set of wide stairs, blindingly white, the entrance to a palatial temple.

"Here reside the priests and the High Magi. Novices come here including the royal family. To train when they are ready to administer the kingdom. And those especially gifted to penetrate the mystery of the stars." Pointing to a square tower

interspersed with observation platforms at various levels. She kept her knowledge of the universe to herself. They might wish to keep her.

A young urchin in clean white robes came to attend to the horses. They dismounted and climbed the broad staircase flanked by classical white columns leading eventually into an open courtyard. People dressed in various manners moved deferentially aside as he lead her to a smaller enclosure. Temples within temples. A city within a city. Receding geometries and false vanishing horizons reminding her of a Picasso painting. Masters of dissolving perspectives, bent architecture though upon closer inspection, in focus it was all aligned, strange planning. Living quarters for those who were studying the arts of the mind, the crafts for rational application of the mind, the essence of thought itself. Interestingly he had not mentioned either religion or gods. It was the foremost college of learning.

A priest dressed in blood red robes greeted them with resolute expression, escorting them through another columned perimeter into a third and smaller courtyard. Savarna saw raised walkways disappearing into the jumble of abstract dwellings as they meandered slowly past the smaller courtyard and into an alley. It literally was a maze. The alley shortish in that it was not linear. Passing under houses, then over a small water course like a weir, suddenly houses dropping way below as they skirted a small public square on top of another dwelling. Catching the odd glimpse of the astronomical tower then back into the maze. The place felt cool both physically and mentally recumbent in an ageless knowledge, steeped in exultant wisdom.

Out of nowhere another wizened priest welcomed her, with the novice her initial escort bowing then leaving. He opened a door where they had stopped. It was to be her apartment for the duration. Her serpents still affected by the narcotic of the cloth. The

priest stepped back a little, he following her. There were two rooms, cushions strewn across the floor of the first with a cabinet to one side and an ornate brass pourer and small cups reminding her of a Turkish coffee set. A shuttered window, the next room with a straw mattress and new sheepskin covers. A recess for her clothes and other belongings and what surprised her, a flush toilet. Noticing this the priest informed her the water was collected from the rooves to be used later. A flush toilet. These people were brilliant. Futuristic urban design as well. Yet lost to history. A worry. Her warrior companion took his leave. His mission of delivering Savarna done. She thanked him for the pleasant company. The slaving party diplomatically avoided.

The priest, of indeterminate age said an attendant would come with refreshments. Then an audience with the High Magus. From out of nowhere, these people had a habit of just appearing a young girl stepped forwards dressed in immaculate white as was the priest. He nodded and left and was gone. Vanished into the maze. From inside the side cupboard the girl retrieved a plate of nuts, and bowls of some paste, a bit like dahl Savarna amused seeing the tasty pieces of flat bread. She heard water rushing and the girl returned with a pitcher of water. Motioning for Savarna to sit amongst the cushions she did. And noticed the subtle bass relief along the walls, just there by a smidgin. Hard to make out. Cat women, jackal men, symbiot animals, abstract humanoids, interwoven with strange geometries both simpler and just as convoluted as Celtic art. She wondered if she was in the future but then remembered the Dravidians.

She was pleased with the snack. Even the low table was marble. The fruits dried of course. The sweetmeats under a meshed cover, tinted alabaster bowls of semi fried vegetables, a sort of cross between Lebanese and Indian food Savarna was impressed by the solitude of the city's design and the lack of flies or animal shit.

The girl though attentive said nothing. Her eyes like two deep pools, enchanting. Then smiled when they made contact. Not abashed. Savarna said she could leave but the girl said only when she had finished her meal. Then she would clean away the dishes and return the food to the market where it would be given away to the poor.

### **Balkh**

Amongst the off duty Uzbek-Soviet troops stationed at Balkh's military base the vodka was flowing freely and not just in the canteen. The majority of Afghanis abstained. But there were some, a new class of officers and soldiers who wanted to show their more primitive countrymen how worldly they had become. These soldiers now joined their Soviet comrades in the traditional Saturday night drinking bout at the mess hall. The remainder of the indigenous soldiers sat around the barracks playing cards, writing letters

to their families and loved ones whilst others simply lounged around, smoking cigarettes. Those with leave passes had gone into town only to vanish into the night.

The Soviet embassy in Kabul had received Stanislaw's message and for some obscure reason thought nothing of it. The loss and destruction of one helicopter was not reported for several hours until an alert controller noted the discrepancy in their inventory of incoming security cleared telexes. Surveillance along with the local military police acted quickly once the alarm bells were sounded. Maza-e-Sharif was contacted and within an hour extra guards assembled and flown to the military base at Balkh.

The commander sensing trouble retained half his entire detachment for himself, the other half ordered to guard and secure the governor's residence. There, additional machine gun posts were quickly put into place. A Soviet military advisor having arrived several weeks earlier helped plan the defence of Balkh should rebel subversion surface. But Balkh remained quiet. In fact the downing of the helicopter the Soviet's in Kabul regarded as an affront though once they had calmed down it was regarded more directed against the shaky junta running the country. The military director at the embassy insisted the rebels would and could do little else for the moment. But as a precaution Balkh was put by the local military commander on a low level alert. A reconnaissance plane was despatched but they detected only the usual roving bedouins.

By midnight the soldiers on guard duty, both Soviet and Afghanis were thoroughly bored. Most of those on leave had by now deserted. The temperature plummeted below zero. Already Rassid's men were invisibly drifting into town, disappearing into safe and sympathetic households. At the governor's residence the sleepy freezing guards stared vacantly into the garden grounds while foot patrols outside the walled perimeter had unbeknown to those inside fled into the night and the

welcoming hills. Inside the governor and his Soviet advisers stuffed themselves with imported delicacies and guzzled litres of good Russian champagne. For the union of the two peace loving Socialist people.

At Balkh's only military airport two men were on duty at the control tower. Since nobodies air force was going to attack the country they too paid little attention to what was going on around them. They drank copious amounts of tea with a tiny ball of opium and smoked untold cigarettes. When a blip did appear on their radar screen coming from the south west of all places they were determined not to take any notice of it. They were not even listening or watching for any unprecedented flights thinking this to be another Soviet reconnaissance mission. There had been dozens of them in the last few days. With the approaching sound of the helicopter Rassid's men armed and ready mounted their horses and headed discretely for the base. A foot patrol had already been overpowered and the mujahedin preferring to not cut their throats as they were Afghanis sent them packing into the hills.

Two rockets landed right amongst the barracks scoring a direct double hit. The buildings had been constructed far too close to each other. Two bright yellow billowing explosions blew their targets to fragments. Bricks, beams splintered, shattered and rained the rubble over the base. Rassid's men held their fire as the helicopter turned to make a strafing run, its machine gun pods firing furiously. Those still alive were running in all directions, many of them disoriented from having been blown out of the buildings in their sleep. The captured helicopter rained upon them its deadly fire. The machine turned gracefully and fired two rockets into the half dozen helicopters parked on the ground, guns blazing as the explosions shuddered across the burning base ripping them to metallic shreds. Some collapsed as others began to burn. Return fire was erratic. On one

far side of the base some level headed Soviet ground forces were activating an AA gun and began to seriously fire back. The helicopter took a quick shot at the control tower, missed and veered off towards the governor's residence. There were no surface to air missiles.

Rassid's men were given the signal to charge into the base cutting down all resistance before them. Under cover of their own fire the mujahedin planted electric charges at the base of the supply depot. Then scampered to a safe distance. Within seconds the main support beams had been blown out. The metal structure creaked and swayed as a fire broke out at the rear of the huge building. Somewhere another helicopter exploded, sparks of ammunition flying in all directions. Then a volcanic explosion blew the supply depot apart like a cardboard box followed by more ammunition cooking off.

Most of the Afghan soldiers had by now disappeared. The Soviets fought on tenaciously thinking they were being backed by comrades whose cover no longer existed. Some of the rebels stormed the control tower and as they reached it quickly shot the two officers on duty. But then a mighty explosion ripped through it blowing the observation platform off its tall metallic posts. It had been booby trapped killing six Afghans, the first casualties.

The barracks were well alight and the eager flames swept through the other still intact buildings. This made looting difficult but Rassid's men acquired a few light machine guns and other automatic weapons with their attendant ammunition. Others gathered as many portable hand held rockets and launchers as they could carry with them. By now the base was a burning shambles, the lurid orange fire billowing putrid smoke into the still night air. It was time to head off to the governor's residence and military compound to aid their brethren in arms.

The gunship flew low over the rooftops of the town and soon picked up the large two storey residence. Tracers were flying all over the place in the dark below. Set back behind a compound wall Serinda warned the pilot to keep to the centre right of the building thus avoiding the tall radio mast anchored to it. They aimed their first rocket at the main gate letting the defenders think this was to be a frontal attack. A direct hit blew out the massive iron gates with a large section of brick wall as they strafed the building, swooping over it. Making a tight turn and returning from the rear another rocket blew the back wall apart as their furious machine gun fire splintered the windows into firewood. They veered off to come in length wise in line with the radio mast. Having aligned his sights the pilot let go of two rockets. A thud, a bust of bricks and dust as the rockets vanished into the centre of the building, then exploded. The whole wing was demolished in smoke and fire as the radio tower, its mooring destroyed wobbled crazily for some seconds then came down with a resounding clang. Time still to blow the front of the building to pieces as they swooped in a tight turn towards the conflagration below.

On the ground a party of Rassid's men established an effective covering fire keeping the defending machine gun nests well pinned down. It showed Serinda above just where the enemy was located. As they flew in low at them they took out one machine gun post and launched two more rockets blowing off part of the roof. Below Rassid's men were storming the back entrance meeting only sporadic resistance. The Soviet adviser, drunk and in shock tried to escape and was gunned down as he clambered through a derelict wall firing his pistol. Stupid of him.

The elite bodyguards in the meantime had positioned themselves in recessed sections of the still intact part of the burning building. Stationing themselves near the front entrance covering thus two of their own positions whilst another held the rear they



managed to pin down Rassid's raiders. It was a momentary stalemate as their comrades had not yet arrived from the base. The western wing was now in flames lending a bright flickering glow to the garden thus making the attack so much easier as the defenders were brilliantly silhouetted. They had no more than twenty minutes until government troops would arrive from the next base at Maza-e-Sharif.

The rebel gunship attacked from the front once more its machine guns blazing, knocking out another defensive position. Heavy return fire came from the burning building. The chopper fired two more rockets into the still intact eastern wing. One landed short and failed to explode the other vanished through the shattered windows, exploded sending scorched burning debris bounding over the snowy grounds. Within seconds return fire poured out of the upper windows. By now Rassid's men had entered the building from the rear but found heavy resistance coming from the defending Soviets. The upper floor of the western wing collapsed in a flurry of sparks cascading into the frosty night air.

They found the governor hiding on a first floor balcony trying to make his escape. He wanted to be a hero killing one of Rassid's men who were forced to shoot him, his obese body quivering from the bullets which finished him off. There was still stiff resistance from the front where loyal government troops had established a new forward position. Firing at the advancing Afghanis who lead the frontal assault the rebels thus created a desperate diversion drawing off the fire aimed at the rebel gunship. It screamed over the wall firing the last of its rockets as the machine gun ripped apart another defending nest of sandbags flying into the air in profusion. The rockets hit home in the centre of the residence blowing away the middle of the building, the roof collapsing upon the burning pile.

Then suddenly some remaining elite guards fired at the oncoming helicopter. The cockpit was shattered by armour piercing bullets killing the pilot who slumped in a gory mess over the controls. The untrained co pilot visibly shaken did not react quickly enough and the gunship flew straight into the open gaping hole of the missing central front. It bulldozed through walls and skidded to a halt amongst the fragmented rooms shearing off the rotor blades as metal hit resistance in a screaming shriek. All went silent except for the crackling hiss of the burning residence. The two accompanying soldiers had their heads smashed open when they had jumped out of the crashing helicopter prior its premature demise. Serinda clambered out with the uninjured co pilot. Below Rassid's men savagely engaged the defenders of whom there were not so many left.

The soldiers who had downed the gunship momentarily held their fire. Rassid's men took advantage and quickly blew them apart. They were about to storm the building to rescue Serinda and his crew when a blast rocked the entire tottering edifice. The dull boom resounded through the night air followed by a dirty orange fireball billowing through the yawning cavities. Then came a heavy crash of the wrecked gunship as it collapsed with the last remaining supports of the doomed residence bringing down the walls and the rest of the roof. All that remained intact was a remnant of the eastern wing, the remainder of the burning rubble melting the early winter snow. Serinda they found with a few broken ribs and his clothing seared. Rescuing him and his co pilot they managed their escape just as the remainder of the raiders arrived from the mostly demolished base. Within the merest instant of having achieved their mission and the rescue of Serinda the mujahedin melted away under the cover of night taking their wounded with them.

Most of the able bodied men and boys of Balkh had fled with the coming insurgents. Given Kabul's murderous sycophants, retribution was certain to be severe. Many of the women and children had left the town leaving only the old to look after the few meagre belongings along with some chickens and the odd goat, cared for by the infirm.

When an hour later relief troops arrived, the people were prepared for the worst, defiance in their eyes. Luckily they were Afghan troops who in the early morning hours cordoned off the town instigating a house to house search. They found a few old and antiquated weapons which they confiscated. The barracks and the governor's residence were still burning, the fire casting a warm glow over another freezing dawn.

Then came the officers with their Soviet advisers. They looked foreign cold and professional. In true socialist fraternity of friendship the few remaining men were lined up and decimated including any boys over the age of ten. At the governor's burning pile they found their dead troops, some wounded, none Afghans who had vanished mostly with the attack, the remainder fleeing with the retreating mujahedin.

Around the hills of Elburz the rebels were fortifying their defensive bases. Serinda's men returned to the main fort to create the impression that nothing there had changed. With the many underground tunnels the defence of their position would be easy but an attack hard and difficult to maintain. They were ready.

The people of Balkh expected further reprisals but now events were occurring both in Moscow and Kabul which overshadowed the spirited resistance at Balkh.

Within a few days Andropov in Moscow contacted by Utyosov informing him of the events concerning the attack upon their base at Balkh. Complicated with political

events in Kabul. Amin still in good standing with Brezhnev had become the new leader in Kabul backed by the majority of the country. His charm, his civilised form of gentle persuasion, his natural gift for a preference to diplomatic solutions might have vexed the KGB but it was beginning to pay off real dividends for Amin. He was reaping the fruits of his long planning and hard bargaining. In Moscow the Politburo backed him and Amin took the opportunity to convince the remaining factions to desert the ghost of Taraki.

Amin was only too well aware of how Traci had made the cardinal mistake of being too suspicious of Karmal's factional friends. He had also ignored the general mood of the countryside due to his blind ruthlessness and his ineptitude to conciliate with the people. It was only natural that Brezhnev had thrown in his weight behind Amin and he knew it. The country was in a virtual state of siege. Military factions were busy jostling for various positions of power.

Balkh was for the moment unimportant and any moves against the rebels there evaporated. As the factions jockeyed for their respective positions in the political trough Shuja's insurgents were completely forgotten, a storm in a tea cup.

Rassid's men regrouped in uninterrupted peace while Shuja consolidated his bases. In Kabul they were playing musical chairs. All was going so well that Rassid wondered if Shuja and Serinda had not known in advance of the collapse of the government. Their combined victory had meant much to them and they were euphoric that Allah had granted them this decisive battle in their overwhelming favour. Their internal feuds were mended and their quarrels forgotten. The mullahs fired by the fervour of their resurgence preached a united people under the green banner of Islam riding against the invaders with their unfurled black flags of war.

## **Moscow**

Under a leaden sky the blotchy rain streaked down the gloomy buildings of Dzersinski Square. Sunday morning and the streets were deserted as several black shiny Zhigulis's sped into the underground carpark. Colonel Dubrov working for the Third Directorate, Central Asia was the last to arrive. He was worried for the mission had ended in disaster. He blamed both Kabul and Moscow for being both so unprofessional and indifferent to the plight he faced over this debacle. Groping in the dark within a hostile environment and no back up meant he could not guarantee much success. After all this was not Angola. His boss Androponov was sympathetic revamping the Kabul embassy by searching and sweeping the building, vetting and replacing staff, bringing in modern audio and electronic surveillance equipment, actually spending money. Investing in smarter people. After all Androponov had stated bluntly to Brezhnev, no money no results. And Brezhnev feeling elated with his own personal victory over who should rule Afghanistan had complied with Androponov's request.

Feeling confident Androponov had called the leading lights to a crash meeting concerning their turbulent southern neighbour. Sitting in a secure conference room under two crystal chandeliers Ponoramev, the man behind the International Department who

dictated its policy and subsequently that of the Department of Foreign Affairs looked grim. He stated bluntly, now they were all seated around the large oval table, Lenin looking concerned on the wall, that it was time he handled Afghanistan. So far ignored by the ID it now had swollen to monumental proportions, awakening from its other duties Dubrov noted wryly. He was sitting next to the more sturdy Dimitry Ustinov, the tough, inflexible, dogmatic and successful prime mover of the Defence Ministry which meant Soviet defence in general. He was more often than not supported by Marshall Ogarky and Admiral Gorshikov who had built up the Soviet Far Eastern Fleet during the time of Vietnam's liberation. Completing this little forum was Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov called in from the Collegium to liaison with all of them on a monthly basis. Androponov introduced Zhukov to Dubrov, the former a lean nervously thin sanguine man with darting blue eyes and bloodless lips. Coffee was served. Dubrov smelt a rat, the meeting a cabal of sorts.

Androponov fingered a cream coloured file, property of the inner sanctum of the Politburo. They all glanced at it haphazardly pretending not to see it. A thick heavy silence hung like a hangover in the room. They were either waiting in respectful silence for the meeting to begin or, like Dubrov were suffering from the previous night's revelry. Dubrov heard the water slide down the double glazed windows which drummed upon them a discordant beat reflecting the turmoil of his own mind.

"Utyosov sent us another coded message." Androponov began without the usual introductions. Seeing their vague expressions he explained he was their ambassador to Kabul. "He is working under severe limitations. Afghanistan is of a unique nature if one can call it that." Dubrov noticed the belaboured breathing of the collective group as if they were one combined organism.

“Afghanistan,” he continued calmly, almost paternally adjusting his glasses, “is a mess. Trying to fathom it is even worse. The resultant scenario is far from positive at the moment. Six years ago we managed to gain Kabul as a satellite state under Daoud who had ousted the corrupt monarchy. Relations between our two countries improved considerably. But it did not take long for the usual reactionary forces to block our progress there. Daoud with typical Afghan compulsion and mark this well, because tribal relations still dictate political realities there, arrested anybody who opposed him. Many of our friends and hard working communists were rounded up, many of them liquidated. This is not so unusual for the Politburo,” a pregnant pause, “had encouraged Daoud to sever his western ties and the gap was naturally filled by us even though we had to stand by and tolerate the clandestine murders of our compatriots. The people needless to say supported him.”

They were all content for Andropov to carry on. No one was feeling perky.

“Two political contenders arose, both fairly unknown quantities. One of them, Karmal was familiar to us as he had been recruited by our own department. For reasons I still fail to understand the Politburo chose Taraki but all this is water under the bridge. It was a mix up if ever there was one coming direct from the Kremlin.” A shot had been fired. No one was ducking. He smirked and waited for the barbed comment to sink in then continued feeling more confident. “Brezhnev contacted Amin who was informed that Taraki was after him. Amin moved first, deposed Taraki then disposed of him.” He was breathing heavily with excitement, watching the others intently. He need not have bothered. No one showed any signs of agreement or disagreement, no surprised looks, no opinions in the air. Their bland reaction was deliberate: a practical method of survival.

“Amin is very cunning, very charming, a diplomat and ruthless killer. Karmal,” Androponov emphasised, “is currently our only hope but being himself a moderate he has virtually no chance because the tribes are backing Amin. He does I believe have the strength to stand up to his opponents. Yet the country is still in the hands of the counter revolutionaries who,” he forestalled any who had the idea of a Muslim revival there, “have little to do with their western neighbour Iran.”

Some shuffling, the most salient reaction of the group.

“Someone had to be a circuit breaker and act. And so Colonel Dubrov and myself planned an expedition into their heartland. Scientific in nature, surveillance the objective. They never made it being blown to pieces in Peshawar. We sent in two of our best agents,” looking placatingly at Dubrov, “who were promptly captured. We sent in a negotiating team for their release. One of the helicopters was blown out of the sky killing an assistant of Stansilaw’s and later Stanislaw himself was shot. Capturing the remaining helicopter a gunship actually, the rebels launched an attack on the governor’s residence in Balkh where we had several agents and military advisers. The governor and our aides were mowed down and the building burnt to the ground in the firefight. The army base at Balkh was destroyed in a simultaneous raid. And this comrades,” Androponov said in utter seriousness, “has occurred because certain people have been lax, indifferent, blind and incapable of facing socialist reality.” Implying the Kremlin’s advisers and the majority of the Politburo had lost their way. “There are bureaucrats who think Afghanistan is another Hungary. But I think they are beginning to realise this impression of theirs is totally wrong. Then again there have been some refreshing results albeit a little late in the game. But it will give us a greater amount of freedom in executing our



future mission this time complemented with proper logistic support.” His smile chilly, sipping his coffee.

Placing the empty cup on the table Andropov having their attention, of sorts, continued: “I am sending Colonel Dubrov and Marshall Zhukov of the GRU into Afghanistan. We are currently assembling Spetnaz troops near Termez to aid the Marshall when the time comes. We must have Afghanistan or this internal dilemma of theirs will lead to international intervention by foreign powers. I need not project the disastrous result such overt action will have upon us all.”

Finally a murmur of assent.

For the rest of the dreary morning they spoke of the necessary logistics and adjacent strategies. Andropov after they had agreed to the military schedule said before any decisive action was to be taken and taken it would be, wished for more information to be gathered, accurate information this time. In the meantime the reservists in Central Asia were to be called up, aeroplanes strategically assembled and the Far Eastern Fleet alerted to steam into the Indian Ocean. With China, Cambodia and Vietnam at flashpoint the west would never notice what was happening in Afghanistan. And Carter’s debacle in Iran was keeping the Americans nicely preoccupied. Andropov rose and put the contents of the creamed folder through the shredder.

Just how they felt.

## Kabul

The Soviet transport drifted over the rugged white peaks under a turquoise sky. As they made the final descent they saw to their left modern factories gleaming in their newness surrounded by bright airy apartments and towards the centre the brown jumble of old Kabul. The bazaar spread out under the usual brown haze which cloaked the city with its snowy white rooves and domes broken only by a meandering silver Kabul river. Landing swiftly onto the smudgy tarmac. Dubrov stumbled out of the bloated plane instantly invigorated by the crisp dry wintry air.

He was part of a trade delegation come to meet the representatives of Afghanistan's branch of Aeroflot. His friend Zhukov had arrived on a previous flight. Security he noted was lax with only a few APC's about.. Customs a mere formality Dubrov wondered what the ambassador was doing here greeting him at the shanty airport lounge. Utyosov familiar with this area was really of secondary importance. Concerned because the Shah had been deposed not through foreign intervention but by a resurgent fundamentalism that proscribed the Muslim faith. An obtrusive wedge was now firmly implanted in western Asia. Equally fully briefed about Zhukov's aims focussing upon possible points of resistance the country offered the rebels. Balkh was marked out as Dubrov's territory. His duty also included the release of their people still held in forced custody. Any information gained was to be relayed to Zhukov who would inform his superiors in Moscow. But Dubrov would also inform Andropov, a little arrangement

they hatched between themselves. As the two left the airport building to enter their chauffeur driven Chaika, Dubrov asked Utyosov who the two senior Afghan officials were so busily observing them.

The ambassador turned to face them. Dubrov cringed at such a blatant act of non discretion. Utyosov unruffled said it was their unscheduled flight from Moscow which had attracted their attention. Had he come on a regular Aeroflot flight he might have entered unnoticed. Dubrov smarted at this and asked the question again. Utyosov said one was the Minister of the Interior, the other belonged to the Department of Foreign Affairs. Politically behind them were the Afghan secret police. Both Russians surprised the Afghans had not sent minders. Feeling haughty no doubt.

They drove off. Utyosov continued to brief Dubrov on the conditions of the newly reconstructed embassy. One bright spot in this dim and dismal entanglement of theirs in this rugged land was the fact that their field agents were literally crawling like ants over the countryside, except of course Balkh.

Dubrov watched the wide empty streets as they sped past bare trees, the ice rimmed mountains receding behind them. They drove through the new suburbs, signs of growing affluence prior the first revolution when money had been plentiful.

“There is the American embassy.” Utyosov pointed at an overbearing cheap looking monstrosity. They saw several other consulates then cut along a deserted park surrounded by a high perimeter wall. This was the old royal palace. They crawled through a round about as slow moving carts some drawn by men moved sluggishly to their various destinations. Then followed the iced up Kabul river for a while. Rocky hills loomed over both sides of the road cutting the city into the shape of an hour glass. This was the Kohe Sherdharwasa, a singular mountain dominating the skyline. Then through

the old city where they had their embassy set aside from the noisy tourists, foreign consulates and other interfering delegations.

Entering reception Dubrov was delighted to find an ebullient Zhukov who had thoughtfully prepared a small feast for his arrival. They sat down to consume mountains of food and drink, copious amounts of champagne washed down with good clear vodka.

“Comrade Zhukov you I believe have the best job here, I truly envy you.” Dubrov beamed thoroughly intoxicated. “As a delegate from Intourist you will see the best the country has to offer. Herat, Kandahar, the fleshpots of Kabul, even the beautiful Banian Lakes.”

Zhukov nodded, his face florid red. “Oh yes, looking for strategic points of defence or possible points of ambush along the major arterial roads and note the oasis and watering holes used by the local population. Hmm a fine venture wouldn’t you agree?”

“I do, I do. Now remember friend, Balkh is my province where I will negotiate the release of our citizens. But truly I am certain there is something being planned up there notwithstanding that little skirmish of theirs. Enacted I am sure for their own morale boosting benefit if I am not mistaken.”

As the evening wore on and more bottles were emptied with Zhukov and Dubrov listening to Utyosov who told them things they had not been briefed on regarding their prospective missions. A fine congenial conversationalist who brought up vivid images of the rugged land and its people. As fighters they were diametrically opposed to their Soviet or European way of thinking. Defying all military strategies. For starters they never relied on any preconceived military plans. They could not be compared even to the Viet Min. Nor were they ideologically motivated. They had no social or practical aims, they made no promises although pretended to do so. Their motivations if they could

define them as such were neither political or even religious in essence. In this respect their nature was truly unique and to make things just that little bit more difficult for them, the whole of the country's population was essentially nomadic. The repercussions were that the cities here were more of an anachronism. Utyosov cautioned them stating even if they did control the four major urban centres it meant nothing in terms of real tangible power. Afghanistan he reasoned could not be taken.

Dubrov and Zhukov exchanged glances and continued to drink to the health of the mother country. Ah the vodka tasted even better here. Such export quality was reserved only for diplomatic and high ranking military staff. This indeed was the good life. All would be well. Afghanistan was virtually theirs.

Or so they thought. Utyosov knew better.

Retreating to the apex of the zigurath gave Merduk a sense of inner power. Below the jumbled houses, the jostling market, the teeming streets. Up here solitude. He almost missed his rather uneventful life on Prima. Sounded out by a Primaian kabal who knew something of exo-alien sentients such as these Earthers. Then the clandestine trip to Regum where the Simulacrum had developed a sense of self which soon transmuted into Zohex. The Reganians, in a quandary and not wishing to loose the entity entirely had sent him to keep an eye on Zohex. The identity now a persona which Merduk considered must have more in mind than just mere survival. The way he had fooled Shaviscara's army to invade Tellurium only to see the continent come crashing down taking all with it, save the few who did make it indicated to Merduk that Zohex was also clever and cunning. Which indicated forethought, precognition. Which led to manipulating the present to manifest a future derivative design. Zohex had become much more than he was. And there was very little Merduk could do. Only the Reganians had the resources to delineate future scenario's. And though both were aligned through collapsing designed probability waves meaning they could be extracted at any moment the controllers on Regum kept him here. So his job was not yet done.

Somewhere below in the palace complex Zohex was celebrating with his warriors his victories over the peaceable Dravidians. This was not warfare, it was massacre. Raucous laughter drifted up along with the shrieks of delight from debauched courtesans. They might end up blind drunk or drugged to the eyeballs but Zohex made sure security was tight. As if he didn't trust all his chieftains or perhaps even himself.

As Merduk paced the floor it occurred to him that Zohex accepted him just like that. Of minor importance. Not that it galled him. He preferred to be left alone. He functioned better as an Isolate. What a pleasant definition. He might be the arch priest at

Vahnsin's court yet he felt no affinity with the borderline psychotic priests and their ancient rites of passage, of obsequience, of grovelling servitude.

But was all this part of the plan regarding Regum's mission to Earth. Or that of Prima's, his controllers. He knew he and the insert Zohex were here to gather not just data on the local inhabitants, but also to align their consciousness to Prima's ideal expressed through the non negotiable belief in monotheism. In a way Zohex was leading the masses in that direction with his exultation of Ahriman. Merduk could see the germinating idea being implanted in the consciousness of the people. The big question was would the Reganians allow this process to come to fruition? Were there other Inserts or Isolates from Regum to counterbalance Prima's overarching aims of psychic domination, executed through the ever present though distant Deep Visionaries who Merduk was sure kept in contact with Zohex to make sure Prima's will was done.

Or would Regum's WebSpace assume command. Given Zohex's homicidal wars Merduk realised Zohex had adopted the pathological traits of the local population. Whether it was a sham or genuine almost did not matter. Did the Primaian Domain Lords want a demented race of monotheists loose in the universe? Or were they planning another great catastrophe if Zohex went off on an insane tangent.

Zohex, beyond doubt had woven a malignant potency around himself which then irradiated everything else. A supreme thraldom which somehow did not effect Merduk. Whilst thinking Merduk's rambling mind was distracted by the other mystery here. The cavern beneath the cave where a mysterious opening spewed forth a darkness, an absence of light which in itself was a presence of a force that linked itself with something as yet unknown far away, way beyond the stars, beyond the galaxies, homing in on their own galaxy. Was this a link inserted by the Deep Visionaries? Knowing of their latent mental

powers Merduk had merely coasted to discover this much. He was too wary to complete immerse himself lest he become overburdened or worse infested with whatever it harboured within itself. Or whether it was an alien cogency aligning the Earthers to its inherent design.

Some of the priests who worshiped there had informed him that this was the outer essence of Ahriman. God of the Dark, appearing when the Earth was young whence the god had formed his abysmal crypt. Biding its time for eons until resurrected by equally dark attuned intelligences which had brought the dark god forth into the world of light. Except it had also awoken lesser kindred psychic malingering entities from beyond the stars, from that same possible location which Merduk was too cautious as yet to investigate further. A possible pestilential threat drawn down by accepting humans who craved the powers it bestowed upon them. Crafted into the psychic presences of Ahriman's coadjutive servants who spread across the land to ensnare others only too eager to succumb to their, the priests will. The dark intelligence behind it spreading its web over this planet.

Along with its own mythology. It was amazing as Merduk, agitated was figuring out, here in his retreat what exactly was going on on this planet. Ahriman considered himself to be the progenitor of life moulding the natural forces into recognisable form. Home Superior. Transcendent over life and continuing on beyond death. To reincarnate for the sole reason of continuing what Ahriman had begun.

Yet Zohex had probably been instrumental in the fall of Tellurium and with Ahriman that of Khasnesh. Or had that been due to rising elemental forces with their tenuous link to life itself expunging the negative due to their heinous distortions to succumb to the entropy of their own riven minds. Seen from without it appeared as if it



had been Ahriman who had embraced the perhaps heretical tendencies of these two kingdoms striking out independently and seeing no need of the pestilential supremacy thinking itself as utterly unique and incontestable. Something its rulers denied. Thus had Ahriman rearisen, ascending from his pit of oblivion and with his morbid aura smothering the would be usurpers. So that his Turanian Race would be supreme. Blooded barbarians who in their madness worshiped lesser aborted gods.

Merduk standing alone. Still secure. Not part of this insane pattern being woven around him. Thanks to being exposed to the techno savvy Reganians it might be that he had been so placed to bring in their WebSpace so as to neutralise the strange and dreadful powers of psychic enchantment into a greater if not potentially infinite whole where the antics of these demented dark gods were but a minor diversion. Thus curtail and assuage the destructive urges inherent in Zohex's deceiving aberrant visions. Hopefully maybe to succumb to his own demented hubris.

With Elburz as silent as the tomb. As if they knew that destiny favoured them. Their plan simple. Use Ahriman's devouring mania to run amok so much so that everything in the end was consumed, including Shaviscara's own manias along with Zohex's penultimate obsession of total dominance all feeding the Dark God's own insatiable hunger. Then those whose psychic alignment was linked to the fabric of the universe, currently isolated would break through the debris of corruption guaranteeing their victory. For Merduk knew and Zohex did not, having just been created or self manifested that Earth's later history had all but forgotten what had occurred here in the mists of shrouded time in long lost mythological ages.

The Earthers in the future shaking off this perfidious dross. Unless it was Prima's aim to make sure Zohex and his alignment to this malignant creation masquerading as a

god was their sole aim. Then contact would be direct and Earth's history follow another trajectory. Through another set of embedded not potential but actual probability waves creating an altogether different reality. One currently absent in the future present from whence he had come. This much the Reganians had explained to him. That all possible futures were there but only one could be real and actual. One different to Prima.

The vision so overwhelming that Merduk sat on the divan. The pale ghastly aura of Zohex's and or Ahriman's psychic dominance clinging to the ruins of once proud cities and humble hamlets. Decimated corpses in horrible and bizarre postures, their souls sucked out of them littered the countryside where once had grown lush crops. The land eroded, decayed with only a poisoned blithe heat lingering, reminding him of a wasted funereal land with morbidly remnant clawing demonic appendages hungering for more. With Vahnsin supreme over this nighted hell. At least he was not a part of Zohex's impetuous and eviscerated inanities.

He took a deep breath wanting to cleanse himself of this rising psychic decay. Allowing the silence to envelope him. Slowly becoming calmer as he breathed steadily and rhythmically concentrating on nothing. Then with some practice he might be at one with the real universe, not this foul apparition. To reach beyond the stars, not to access Regum's WebSpace but find this alien source that he was sure was feeding Zohex's urge. Not the Deep Visionaries who were mere transmitters but find their source responsible for bringing forth a future not meant to be. Though calm, his mind steady he only managed serenity. Rewarding. But it was not enough. So far the source remained shrouded in its own secret design. He could try the dark fount but he knew he was not as yet strong enough to withstand its presence. He sighed and decided instead he might as well sleep.

Winged sleep did not come easily to Savarna. She was restless, her thoughts teemed and somersaulted over themselves in a jumble of ideas, visions and events most of them meaningless in their singularity. The memory of the twentieth century too strong. When the pandemonium finally burnt itself out she discerned someone else's terror and confusion. A feeling of abhorrent rejection coupled with an equal attraction of a savage sense of something implacable and unnatural. A disturbance brooded within the citadel, whose location could be anywhere. Its myriad chambers of obtuse angles sculpted into planes so intercrossed that both light and darkness mingled into a perspective of exceeding complexity. She herself confused if this was not just the impression of this almost futuristic city, the citadel either here which shocked her even more, or the centre of the source she was after or pregnant visions of a corrupted mind holding her in trance throughout the encroaching and encompassing spells to keep her out.

The rampart phantasmagoric images disentangled themselves from the confusion underlying the array of her mixed emotions. Only her objective remained. She would fasten onto that no matter what. She felt frustrated by the will of heaven and its mystagogic gods. She felt rage and an impotent hatred of the forces mocking her humanity even though they ought to have been mere bloodless images. Delusions of Maya. Only to wake on shock. Her serpent guardians had vanished. When? Where? How? She sat up fully awake totally distraught. Did that mean her occult protection had been removed? Was Kali still present?

The room faded into darkness as a visage of indeterminate resolution simmered in its own ebon self, an auric incandescence proclaiming an insouciant death. Hers? The vision faded except for one green gleaming light: a ring on a small and ornamentally

carven pedestal around which curled a luminescent serpent, its guardian. The floundering light entranced Savarna as an irruption of fear entered her mind. Into it was jammed the leering smile of a wizard under whose control the serpent lay ensnared around the fascinating ring into which the gem was woven.

In the temple courtyard dim smouldering fires consumed the fresh air poisoning it with insalubrious substances. Savarna became aware of being an unwilling spectator to something direful and sinister. She saw a king adorned in robes of vibrant purple embroidered with mysterious golden emblems, alchemically forged. Besides him sat a voluptuous demonic woman, an angel of incarnate death. This one had to be one of Kali's servants for whom Savarna felt a strange affinity mixed with deep loathing and a spine chilling aversion.

Red robed priests walked around a dais upon which burned the sacred fire, an emblem of their sorcerous religion. The thick clinging smoke turned vapid. A question of great importance had been asked and in the floating mists came the answer. A sallow light illumed the smoke with its preternatural glow. All but the priests seemed in a state of shocked suspense. Something had gone wrong. The rage of the dark woman quivered with maddened emotion. To everybody's surprise another female, a radiance of white beauty stood magically amongst them. Savarna recognised her as the girl who had escorted her to her rooms. Surely a coincidence of archetypes.

The vision was too intense, the portents too overpowering, the powers too colossal to be grasped all at once. Savarna felt herself out of her depth. How desperately she needed to take the power which Shuja so jealously guarded. Back in the secret fane she thought this would have been simple child's play. But as things stood Savarna knew

she was caught in two dreams, two trance states. Either they were not of her own making or they originated within her own mind.

The dark feline beauty uttered an ebon curse unto the girl who ignored her while Savarna shuddered at its choleric implications. This was a portent of morbid exultation, a riven mind flowing into a putrid cesspool. The king became nervous, the priests in their blood red robes remained silent. Suddenly Savarna saw three faces staring at her.

The king's face was but a fleeting shadow. But the dark osirian stare of his slender accomplice, her eyes rooted in the depths of Hades held Savarna in a vice of awesome fear, transfixing her own mind into a numbing impotence. This hovering caryatid, this truly awful and malignant threat poured from within her the fetid decay of worm ridden death whilst scorpions jerked hypnotically around the girl in an odour of putrefaction pushing a clammy sinister veil over her vision. Savarna sank into blissful nothingness. But it was not to be a permanent respite. A gentle rustling startled her as she felt a deadly peril impinge itself upon her. She saw a fleeting adumbration in a dismal cavern whence a necromancer watched her foudlsomely. As she woke and looked around in terror she collapsed in chaotic profusion of temporal insanity.

A dismal light penetrated her frantic mind. Savarna sensed the room, the cushioned bed but felt not the alien presence which she so anxiously expected. Careful to open her eyes she was relieved to see an array of food upon the low table in the centre of the annexed room. Next to her bed was a pitcher and bowl of water for her morning ablutions. Dressed after washing and refreshing herself she prayed and offered thanks to Kali who seemed to have deserted her. Absentmindedly she nibbled the fruits and ate the leaven bread, drinking from the shiny chalice containing a light clear invigorating liquid which eased her tensions.

Silently a priest appeared at her open door. Savarna was not in the least surprised at his sudden quiet entrance. She had not even been aware the door was open. He too wore the blood red robes of his caste. Being satisfied she had breakfasted Savarna was bidden to follow him to see the Archimage of Moerdrum.

Was not this city doomed? The thought passed.

She accompanied him in graceful procession passing the oblique corridors with their slanting windows through which passed both light and shadow. Inclined planes they walked upon as if they were mere illusions floating above architectural distortions, with a clever play of light her guide assured her. Such splendid deceptions would confuse any who dared enter unbidden. Now and again he would stop and silently mutter an incantation before a quivering floor projected a new section of solid matter along their way which had previously been absent. And so they moved along fluted colonnades, distorted and shadowed recesses that were but odd continuations, climbing circular stairs in strange slants or descending slopes that appeared all but horizontal. Ceaselessly they continued through this crypt of mirrored reflections and refractions of light amongst inclement wonders until they descended without movement into the nether darkness of hidden vaults.

Savarna felt drowsy and began to ascertain even less as misty walls hid all from her while bright orbs diffused in swirling thick fog their surreal emanations around her. He guide becoming a mere wisp of his former substance. He assured her the languor was just another defence of their craft, befuddling the senses to beguile alien presences. Strong wizardry indeed. With difficulty she continued then was suddenly blasted by a rush of icy cold air shaking her mind into wakefulness.

She found herself in the extreme depths of a necrophytic chamber. Hewed from ancient stone, upheaved and twisted into sectioned contortions supported by strange spiral columns. She beheld a reclining umbrage. The priest spoke quietly to the dweller of the darkened gulf who muttered his estranged chants, incomprehensible even to her. The chamber glowed through incandescent fluted trumpets, their twisted shapes a reminder of utter madness and hovering insanity in its slimy light.

The priest motioned she should ascend towards the raised floor. Savarna obeyed as if mute of mind and will. A crepuscular darkness hovered at the edge of this loathsome place and having climbed the short stairs found herself facing a raised dais. Struck dumb she stared at the slouching image which lay slovenly on a carved sarcophagus of brilliant white marble. On one side stood a raised pedestal blossoming into an unfolding lotus, engraved with runes of daring secrets. Savarna was transfixed for this was the image which had haunted her sleep. A sickening smile spread across his face, a semblance residing beyond the confines of human sanity through forbidden secrets discovered all too soon.

“You bring portents disfavourable to the realm.” He addressed her, swathed in stiff lynx robes, clasped by jewelled oddments that flickered deadly fires within their crystalline confines.

“Perhaps these things were meant to be.” She answered her courage returning with surprising speed.

“Did you preside for your own benefit over the usurpation of Lethena, Daughter of Kali, Queen of Moerdrum?” He hissed.

“There would be little point as I myself am a devotee of Kali.” She retorted staring defiantly at him. He was surprised. His eyes registered her resistance for a few flickering moments.

“You a devotee?” He smirked.

Savarna in an instant sank to the floor and started her shrieking incantation as she had practiced for decades. The room echoed redolently with her sibilant vibrations, her beseeching power and urgent spell, monotonous, sonorously building into a cresting stridulation. The flames hidden within secret altars flared to life, the serpent wakened dropping its golden green emerald ring onto the floor tumbling to the supplicant. He nodded his head seemingly pleased with Savarna’s performance.

“Ah.” He exhaled with infinite patience. “Then it was not you who had instigated this dreadful deed of prophesy. We perceived your presence yet it was elsewhere we should have searched. Your appearance was obviously a boon and not a dangerous incursion. Pray be seated.” And Savarna saw a small couch swirled with dragons feet and beastly talons supporting cushions of glowing majestic cloth.

“My name is Shaviscara and I am the humble servant of Kali. My daughter born of the mystic union of the goddess rules Khasnesh from the city of Moerdrum more through my blessings and her will than by anybody else. The king is blind and greedy, lecherous in the extreme and only Lethena can satisfy his perverse desires. Last night it was prophesised that my daughter was sterile and that the royal occulted blood would not be passed on. The lineage will die through bareness, surely the work of enemies. We had thought your sudden arrival more than mere coincidence and thus excluded you from the ceremony. For it had been foreordained another will rule, namely the sister of the king, Devasi.”



Savarna watched with fascination the twitching squirming shadows about her. He shattered the visions by demanding a request of her.

“I know what has brought you here. The quest for the source of a power, ancient beyond all reckoning, potent beyond human understanding. Yes I see by your eyes this is so. You are a recent initiate and will learn in time to hide what you would desire. Kali burns strongly within you. That ring,” he pointed, “is yours. It was good magic coming from one such as you. For no one had ever influenced or even distracted my serpent, my companion and guardian. This ring wrought by the fiery ages before the coming of the ice has my spell of protection as well as the hoary power of the serpents of Thule ingrained upon it. It is cast in shining electrum and is yours to keep.”

She picked up the small object glowing in its blazing hewed metal. A delicate serpent, its circular body entwining the green emerald glowing with distant fires. Itsmetic life stretched around the gem grasping its tail by its own striking head. A symbol of ancient lore.

“It is magnificent craftsmanship.” She bowed. He returned the gesture with the slightest nod of his head.

“Crafted by a wizened woman now perished in the destruction of Ragnarok. She was the last of her race and that was their munificent emblem.” She slipped the ring onto her second left finger. It glid on smoothly burning with a pleasant tingling which gave her body a lighted aerial levity.

“A doom is approaching and we suspect its origin as well as you do.” He smiled quizzically.

“I do? I know I have been searching, that much is true.”

“We came to this land,” He began for his own reasons, “at the end of the last ice age. It suited us for we knew this land was destined for greatness because Kali ruled here. This was no fortuitous or circumstantial event but had been planned long before. Expeditions of powerful magicians had made their obescience here for centuries prior our actual arrival. The wizard priests prepared the way. But deceitful treachery at home destroyed our blessed isle and we were forced to flee by necessity. We were followed by those who were not so well disposed towards us.” He admitted candidly.

“These latter arrivals had bidden their time wandering in foreign lands waiting for the last of the ice to recede. Their journey followed the thawed rubble of young mountains and found beneath the fissures where the ice had dislocated the earth’s crust a place of power so ancient and mighty that its resurrection now threatens to engulf us all. It is a power beyond any known evil, a blasphemous hell hounding idiocy united with a mad king who rules in its name. Harking none the very resurrection of that ancient nemesis drawn to itself a dark corruption by which the universe will one day be destroyed. There were others in league with those who aided them to raise it from the decay of the waiting chaos. Everyday the portents grow more baleful. But since we are of the same blood we are impotent against these enemies and while their insipid power grows, ours wanes.”

“I have ordained for you to go hither. Destroy this archimage and his kingdom, otherwise the decay will spread like a deliquescent marasmus over us all. Strike him down. The bestial monstrosities of their penultimate delusions would then collapse and the charnel disease will slither back to its own abysmal darkness.”

“Its time is of the end of the earth and the earth is but young. The wizard who calls himself Merduk holds this power fast to his bosom. He enslaves by magic the

darkness against its own will, against its own laws. If he succeeds in this misdeed he will have grafted this potent gulf onto the runes etched deep within the mighty walls and special tablet of his temple. Then these magical spells would be one with the necromancer and the earth so corrupted only to wilt within one human generation.”

“Do this,” his words flowed like a cascading stream, “for he must be destroyed and I will grant you anything humanly possible or within my power to command.” He relaxed into the bejewelled cushions littering the white sarcophagus, his serpent sunk back into its own trance.

“My magic is of a neophyte oh Shaviscara and I would need your craft to disguise not only my person but also my intention to achieve your aim. It will be no easy task even for one so powerful as you. The cloak of invisibility which I would require more mentally than physically is no easy thing to accomplish and takes many years to perfect. It would be a challenge for one as worthy as yourself.” She replied with convincing modesty. Shaviscara pondered upon this.

“What you say is true enough. But the art of disguise is best practiced in this case by simpler methods. Our priestesses, worshippers of the mighty fires by which the sun gives life are sacred in all the lands for they wish not power and are trusted by all for this very reason. It might be best of you appear as one of their kind like the girl who waits upon you.” He tapped his sensuous lips thoughtfully.

“You will relate to my enemies that you had run away knowing we are planning some terrible revenge. Your news must be presented in this way and this only to Merduk and no other. As one vested in holy matters, you would not have to profane yourself in the precincts of their licensuous court. You will instead retreat to the silence of their temple where you will not be disturbed. It is a custom of our races that none but the

ordained may enter any holy fane. Nor need you fear the wrath and watchful eye of that king and his guards or veteran soldiers. Thus will you execute the plan I have in mind. How like you that?" He asked wistfully.

"If you aid me by imparting the necessary knowledge and means to carry out this deceit then will I aid you in your scheme, marking your promise what you have previously said."

"Then it is done." Shaviscara said jubilantly as the hidden fires of the recessed altars flared high for the archimage was crying out his thanks to his fiendish gods.

## Kabul

Colonel Dubrov lit a Marlboro inhaling with deep satisfaction. Waiting in the situation room with Utyosov and two other non descript men. Going over the final plans regarding the country. Final preparations concerning the friendly occupation of Afghanistan were proceeding with exceptional speed and exceeding precision rarely encountered when coordination was necessary with rival departments. Dubrov knew that this move was a cover regarding Balkh. But it was not all plain sailing. They were being confounded by the Afghanis who openly embraced their revolt with zealous fervour right in the face of the mightiest nation on earth. The two others apparently unconcerned.

Utyosov was unrolling the city map as Zhukov entered to discuss their plans.

“Comrades,” Utyosov said genially, “as we all know General Ivan Pavlovski toured the country earlier this year. It is primarily on the strength of his findings that we are gathered here. But first let me introduce to you another distinguished guest.” He pushed a button on the desk’s intercom. A non descript man of middle age in a rumpled suit entered. “Officially he is our First Trade Secretary. But we know he expertise lies elsewhere.” Meaning military intelligence. Utyosov poured them all large shots of vodka.

“We greet you General Sergei Sokolov, First Deputy Minister of Defence.”

Dubrov guess just a little off. They raised their glasses and drained the toast to their exalted visitor.

“Than you. Unfortunately I must leave today.” The general beamed. “However my capable aide Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin whom you already know will take over our role.”

Paputin looked every inch the slavonised European, squat, a round hard face, sharp piercing eyes and brawny workers hands. Or that of a killer Dubrov mused. “Our friend is here to advise Hafizullah Amin on internal security and other related matters.” They laughed at the joke even though it was serious from Amin’s point of view.

“And,” Utyosov continued, “to persuade Amin that this is the wisest course to take in the interest of securing the peace and engendering the good will of our people. Ours is the only realistic approach in resolving this political problem.” Dubrov glad he was keeping to generalities. “We must convince Amin to step down and allow Barbak Kamal to assume the premiership. This we must impress with urgent haste equally in Moscow.” If these two got the hint they weren’t reacting. But his tone did emphasise the futility of the current situation. “Amin is doing more harm than is necessary. Yet the Politburo remains committed to its priorities, which, once applied here has the uncanny tendency to reverse itself.” This much they knew.

“For one the country is still in open revolt against all legitimate authority. Amin’s oppression is ruthless, no different to Taraki’s. Amin has in effect created a state of anarchy. The rebels roam without hindrance of any sort. The compliant cities mouth political platitudes through their mullahs who smuggle arms to their brethren in the hills. Thanks to Amin’s indifference. Not that he is more corrupt than the others. The man has simply no tact. Coming from a strong tribe he thinks he is immune from all criticism and advice, especially from that of our friends. He remains ignorant of the lessons of dialectical history and stubbornly at that. Take Turkestan and Samarkand.” He indicated

with a sweep of his arm spilling a little of his vodka. “We befriended and absorbed them because the people there were fed up with their medieval rulers. But the reverse is the case here.”

That much was true.

“Currently,” the squat dour Paputin added, “we have several thousand advisers working with the country’s armed forces. We know by now that it is the nature of the Afghani to always show their loyalties to those who truly possess strength. The capitalist west to give a glaring example weakened themselves through their own degenerative indolence, the great disease of their retarded political and economic systems. The Afghani’s I believe had in the last analysis lost interest in them and as a consequence also their respect for them. Even historically speaking when the British first tried to placate the hill tribes they merely laughed, then shot them in the back. Several times. Today it is no different. Their fighting spirit ought, by logical extension to identify itself with our might and our show of strength. Wait until we have played our hand and the insurgents will be in our grasp, safely neutralised.”

It looked easy enough.

“An inference to a previous revolt no doubt. This time our mission here will be executed with a well polished and loyal armed force ready to guarantee our future and our stabilising presence in this region.” Dubrov added casually.

“You are grasping the drift correctly comrade,” Paputin admitted somewhat stonily. It must be his manner. Not the genial type. “Comrade General Pavlovski I think left too soon with too little hard information. We need more intelligence especially now that Amin has virtually become a renegade himself, using our money and our expertise to further his reactionary designs in this our sphere of influence.” Pointing to Zhukov he

continued, "This is based on the latest information of the general. It should not take more than a few days for our penetration to gather the necessary details required. The condition in the countryside we know will essentially remain unchanged. The cities especially Herat and Kandahar are still in a state of fervent unrest. Yet strange as it may seem the Iranian revolution has not spilled over the border. In Herat where the people are ethnically related, the diabolical curse of their fanaticism has not yet become apparent. The consequence of this indicates the Afghanis are without a doubt acting independently of whatever may be occurring around them. They receive a certain amount of support through the smuggling of arms but this in itself is nothing new. We have as far as possible sealed off the borders and they are being strictly patrolled by aerial surveillance. The current insurrection directed against Kabul and Amin is purely domestic. Thus I believe our objective will be achieved. Gentlemen a toast to our success." They drank with a glowing deep pride for the glory of mother Russia.

"Which is what specifically?" Dubrov asked with an air of mock innocence. Paputin stared at him as the room fell silent.

"Why the continuation of mutual cooperation as stated in accordance with the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty of last year."

"Ah." Dubrov breathed into his empty glass.

"And now for an important item on our agenda." Utyosov half frowned. "Amin. His oppression has reached crisis proportions. But the man is adroit. Did you know he is blaming the subjugation of the people onto us? It is the rumour of the bazaar. They say we are training their army to commit atrocities against the people. Amin is deliberately distorting the friendly relationship which we so painstakingly constructed between our two countries. Amin's ruse of course is clever but it will be his undoing. He has recently



requested and I have the paper it is written upon that our officials, real and imaginary should be recalled. He blames us for the instability he has created. And the people believe him. It is an affront.” He slammed down the file he was using onto the large table around which they sat. “And it is a blatant lie. He may have painted himself into a corner through this request. Meanwhile the insurgents are gaining more ground and he does nothing. I believe Amin is a self seeking power hungry despot, an adventurer using the people and our good offices to do as he pleases.”

They all concurred.

“So General Sokolov. Inform Moscow the situation here is deteriorating rapidly and that Soviet lives will soon be in grave danger.” He remembered when only last year their embassy had been stormed and forty of their citizens methodically dragged into the street under the jeering eyes of the hateful populace and systematically executed.

“We are being used as scapegoats for Amin’s grandiose plans. We cannot tolerate such barbaric behaviour. Tell Moscow that if fighting does occur the country will become a bloodbath from which there will be no respite. All our hard work will be a harvest of ashes. Our aid, our construction plans, the help we have given these people will then have been all for nothing.” Utyosov finished his glass abruptly.

A knock interrupted them Utyosov rose. A cipher clerk handed him a message. Utyosov stared at it.

“A message from Brezhnev himself. Amin is to be replaced.” They all breathed a sigh of relief. They smiled. Moscow had finally come around and behind them. Had it been Ponoramev and Andropov who had convinced Brezhnev that Amin had never been the right choice or was it Suslov with his fanatical burning ambition to Sovietise the entire world and who had turned the table upon the Politburo?

Taking a deep breath Dubrov picked up the threads of the conversation. “Well, we can now turn to our rebels at Balkh. The fiasco there has to be dealt with separately. This province as you know is my special area of command. And I can give you some good news there. I am to negotiate the return of our people. Moscow has given the go ahead for the rebels to be paid, as requested with their one million dollars but in separate currencies, mainly French and Swiss francs, Dutch guilders, Deutsch marks, British pounds and American dollars, ninety nine per cent counterfeit. The top layers will be genuine. The objective is to discover how the money is laundered by the rebels, the route it takes and where and which foreign interests are involved. It will not be too difficult to find out who their allies are, at home or abroad.”

“An excellent idea comrade Dubrov.” Sokolov chimed in. “From what I have learnt they may even be relieved to dispose of their captives. And of course while you negotiate we will reconnoitre.”

“We will have these rebels flushed out pretty soon I can assure you of that. But we must not alarm them. No overt reprisals, let them think we do not take them too serious a threat so that they in turn think they are indeed for more subtle and astute than us. And don’t let an attack be mounted while I am up there.” Dubrov jested.

### **Vahnsin**

Savarna dressed as a novice of the temple of Moerdrum set forth from the dazzling city to meet the invincible arch wizard Merduk. She was under an escort of the elite palace guards of the king, a privilege and honour never bestowed upon any priestess

in living memory. The further west they rode the worse the ravages of Zohex's evil necromancy became. The land was barren but with the provisions she possessed and the waterways they followed it lightened the burden of the journey. On the second day they reached the first mountain ranges bordering Vahnsin. Here ice fed streams cascaded down onto the plains. Savarna saw many areas where instead of lush forests and blossoming pleasant vales there was only a silent and brooding desolation. Tepid grasses struggled amongst the barren soil. The rocky terrain was scorched by a relentless sun creating a landscape devoid of life.

Apart from the serpentine ring she had won Shaviscara had also invested her with another small but exquisite and most singular wrought jewel. It was a token of their opportune bond for he wished his rival annihilated and she wished to gain the ingress into the mystery of Merduk's phenomenal power. This ring the wizard had indicated was of a diabolical and demonic creation, a perverted art none knew save its unsavoury master. It had been invested with a curse that could manifest its terminal rite in the minds of those who would endanger her life and simultaneously protect her against the implacable domination of Merduk's hellbound lore. Shaviscara also warned her that the archimage was very ingratiating and engaging when greeting noble wayfarers of the ancient chosen path of the gods. Many had become enthralled by his ways, the most guileless of perpetrators not being immune against his expansive and all embracing magic. His testimony of bleached bones ornamented his lands, an epitaph to their futile endeavours, the final testimony of Merduk's deliberations.

Reaching the rim of the desert her escort departed returning to Moerdrum. With the aid of Shaviscara's potent sorcery the crossing would be accomplished without undue hardship. Setting off undaunted into the blighted landscape she wondered and reflected

upon the unparalleled story Shaviscara had related to her regarding her mission. It also served as a warning preparing her for the worst.

Her quest for the secret of this elder lore he confabulated surfaced it seemed at the end of a period of violent upheavals from whence emerged the human race. Even then there already existed a disturbing and alien shadow stalking life upon this planet. Some said it had come from beyond the stars. It was during these climactic and environmental disruptions that evolution gave birth to many of the worst abominations living nature ever furnished. Luckily many died out when the respective physical grotesqueries and their attendant mental aberrations become too distorted to make survival possible. These parodies of life slowly withered and decayed, replaced by lesser horrors. But one common thread clung to these malformations.

Their foreordained doom was crafted in a fashion of sorts, what later sapient sorcerers identified as the sentient hunger of Death; a fearful shadow from which life was not wholly immune. This loathsomeness grew and clung to the imaginations also of men etching itself into the delicate structure of the very essence of their souls. Death satisfied its endemic urge on the living thus passing from one to the other. It became an invasion upon life. But some were spared its embrace. It seemed that certain sentients were more successful in avoiding their doom and became not only the dominant species but also living far beyond their natural allocated time on earth. The ancient sages finally realised that Death, a scavenger and parasite preyed only upon the degenerate when the inner force of life was too weak to repel its onslaught curtailing a natural span which would otherwise have covered eons.

Yet as life continued a drastic change occurred. Over the millennia which followed Death gained its own sentiently evolved Mind. This spawned intelligence

violently seeking its macabre nourishment eventually perceived as subtle changes of the resonating states of all various life forms. Previously the mute, dumb abject distortions of mind or body which had not the intelligence to consciously struggle for survival were its prey. Now the rancorous entity lived off the psychic power residing within sentient life itself.

Death developed with an even greater and palpable rapidity. It was highly successful devouring many of the living abortions thus reducing these wasted forms of degenerate species. Thus they became less frequent and when the last of these monstrous misbirths had vanished Death began to hunt humans with a desperate hunger.

Humanity rose to the challenge. Through Death the minds of the most noble necessitated the creation of an occult science as a vanguard and obdurate defence. Unfortunately there were many who actually thought the occult shield was an evil in itself. Savarna remembered asking if this had been what the warrior had told her of the struggle with their enemies. Shaviscara had nodded stating how a mighty war had been fought over this issue alone. It ended with the destruction of Thule.

Some legends recorded that when their island kingdom was destroyed the catastrophically upheaval took Death with it dragging it into the engulfing sea and boiling oceans. Yet Shaviscara knew this was not so, the wasted sentient detritus still challenged the living. And now one of their plagued realms was Vahnsin where both Zohex and Merduk through their mantic arts actually managed to tame this destructive alien manifestation, enslaved it for their own perverted use to subjugate and dominate the continent. As Ahriman.

Savarna had not noticed during this mental replay of hers that she had crossed the desert aided unwittingly by the wizardry of Shaviscara. The accursed land of Vahnsin lay

in front of her. She heard a galvanising scream then felt a rustling in the air but saw nothing. Something was menacingly near her, pushing and assailing her yet unable to penetrate the charms and amulets of protection she wore. These were probably defences of Vahnsin attempting to snuff out her life.

She saw jagged distorted rocks forced from the earth amongst a rotting moor where in the distance trees cast shadows resembling petrified ghouls. A limpid sun shone weakly amongst the writhing flora, a swamp threatening to engulf the narrow path leading away from the blistered desert. She saw crawling bloated worms, putrid of smell emerging from the confronting vegetation, squirming towards her warm body and that of her horse. Withered limbs uncannily human covered the slimy verdigious lichen, wavering mockingly from trees bent into pandemonic excruciations whilst a screaming wind howled amongst the bucolic decay and not a leaf stirred. Savarna continued unperturbed knowing how the urge of her mission and quest to be more important than this diseased feculence sinking in its own morass.

An ancient temple suffocating under the crawling dank undergrowth sheltered gibbering animals as they slithered amongst the listless broken ruins where lingered and forgotten curses hovered in their own thick asphyxiating atmosphere. Savarna beheld entities which she had no wish to discern, emanations of Zohex or Merduk no doubt. Shaviscara's protection held back the debilitating attacks upon her. They were only mute inanities. Her amulets had the required effects warding off their desperate persistent hunger for her life. The redolent smell of ceremented forms stopped following her and the dripping rheum of the forest gave way once more to the scorched earth engulfed by the ever present sepulchral silence. She stopped to take stock and saw the dread image of

a serrated discordant pile of stones seemingly wrenched from the elements into an insane and dangerous pile. On the horizon stood the citadel of Vahnsin.

Vargen offered incantations seeking the protection of the gods. Devasi's dark eyes watched Bahnum who felt her mind probing his. He assiduously avoided her gaze and stared instead into the sacred flames, concentrating his mind upon the task ahead. He had no wish to reveal his true identity although he felt it would make no difference in the end. The people were used to the concept of a multidimensional reality. Maya swayed serenely to the gentle rhythms of the sacred evocation. Yet Bahnum seemed to feel Devasi's energy, a spirit clothed in human form. She the hope of their people needed for the future which both of them desired to come to fruition. Hers to redeem this continent, his to confront the renegade rinpoche.

Vargen sternly reminded them their enemy was no fool and would exploit with little difficulty any weaknesses within them, thereby gaining strength over them. The soul had to be cleansed. Maya reminded them of the lost happiness, the destruction, the tortures, the debauchery, the horrendous rites, the utter perverseness of Zohex's kingdom where they felt so powerless against the vile strength commanded by both king and magician.

Devasi replied she felt no hatred against Merduk. To do so would only encourage the negative forces of theirs to wedge themselves between them and their aim. Hatred was a subjective bond which made a slave of the person tying them to their own emotional traumas. It sapped energy, will and determination. Something they needed in these furtive times.

Maya spoke her tantalising and melodious voice flowing like a fresh stream into their minds. “Merduk survives because he is not involved in the mundane world like Zohex. He is not caught in the material power vortex. But they will fall heading into the web of their own creation. If they can be caught in Ahriman’s net which is still lingering so menacingly over Moerdrum then will we have a chance to transmutate their blasphemy into the disintegrating wrecks they really are.”

“For to be involved in such things one can easily be caught in that delusive existence. That is why our people were enslaved. But by deciding to follow the example of Elburz strength can be conserved and psychic power renewed.” Devasi chimed in. “In Moerdrum I was in the middle of a hornets nest. With my friend Maya and with my royal blood I had a slight advantage. I was inviolate but you know as I do such laws and pledged mean nothing to the insane. So I practiced the sacred rituals and through secret arts consolidated my strength.” She smiled.

“Your brother nearly had you murdered.” Vargen reminded her.

“What he nearly did or did not do will not change anything. Anyway he did not.” She watched the sun filter through the foliage of the sparkling green forest, then continued, “To the outside world we are invincible and that is a comforting start.”

Bahnum sensed her serenity hiding so many unspeakable dreams. She too was a shaman. As they sat near the sacred fire he hoped for the first time they had a chance. He felt invigorated simply because the battle would not be fought by armies but by the combined minds of Elburz, Vargen, Maya, Devasi and the unmanifest Buddhas residing within the ancient mandala. Suddenly Bahnum decided that to retrieve the rinpoche was too dangerous. Entombment beyond the confines of time, if not utter destruction seemed



to promise a better future now they were all aligning themselves. The rinpoche was a trap.

Vargen seemed to read all their minds. In a pleasant voice he spoke, “Like all living sentient beings you have clearly recognised the riddle we confront. The eddying flow of the past has turned into the bitter wrath of the present, continuing the cold tyrannical grip of Ahriman. The battle between this mundane enslavement and your freedom is written upon the winds of change with undisputable certainty. But like so many things within nature the cycles continue if only through our own desires. Thus we must act if we wish to fulfil this dream even though it sometimes appears as if not even a glimmer of life in these dissembled times can fill the soul, as if instead there clings to the encumbered spirit a consuming despair. If we admonish this delusion the defeat it pretends to herald will be what it is: Vahnsin’s delusion.”

“Zohex’s ancestors,” Vargen continued, “had once been a noble and just race. But the seeds of decay, of distrust and self involvement combined to defeat this nobility of spirit and in its stead a purgatory descended upon them. So be it.” He took a deep breath then solemnly intoned, “I Vargen have studied the outer cycles of and beyond the stars. There under the auguries of the elemental spheres where forces descend and filter through to this planet we will, by using the change so immanently encroaching upon us to transform the restraining conditions to obtain liberation. You Devasi are the power through Maya and Bahnum which will unite the people and repudiate Zohex and with him the realm of Ahriman. This pugnacious evil will be banished and the planet cleansed of its capricious aberration.”

Bahnum wanted to ask what of Merduk? But the sage sought Bahnum’s mind as if he had an inkling just who Bahnum might really be. Bahnum breathed deeply emptying

his mind. If Vargen understood that he was after this renegade wizard well and good. As he concentrated on his breath he could feel the sacred mandala within taking form.

### **Afghanistan**

The Soviet gunship landed delicately in the sloping ground outside Shuja's fort at Boyni Qara. Colonel Dubrov scanning the empty countryside marvelled how such a distant location could create so much trouble. He had seen many villages huddled between rocky crags, settlements with no trees or blades of grass anywhere. The country was one vast continuation of bleached rocks, boulder strewn hills and inhospitable mountains.

And yet the settlements had healthy flocks of goats and sheep, produced cereals, grains, fruits and vegetables. Hashish and opium. He reflected how so many Soviet farmers were lucky to have just some of what nature's bounty bestowed upon the lands of these rugged people. They were experts in self reliance and extremely well organised at that. Everywhere he had seen blacksmiths along with the manufacture of arms. Any concerted military action against them would prove difficult. A scorched earth policy he dismissed out of hand as useless since the earth was barren enough. Their lines of supply and communications were non existent by any standards in this deficient expanse of nothingness.

Dubrov had the Minister of the Interior, one Abdullah Hanballi with him. He did not trust him. The Afghan had said little on their flight except for some transparent truisms couched in vague platitudes.

A small part of hardy Afghanis greeted them. They were armed mountain guerrillas wrapped in their loose brown and grey coats flapping gently in the breeze. Dubrov was unarmed and felt naked on this delicate mission.

They entered through tall wooden gates set into massive caked mud brick walls. Around them were numberless squawking chickens, braying mules, the clanking of a blacksmith working their ancient bellows, leatherworkers repairing stirrups, tailors stitching woollen fleeces onto animal hides. Hanballi impressed upon Dubrov that these forts were really villages, the defensive design serving for protection against not only the harsh climate but also against the intransigencies of the many shifting tribal and clan loyalties. Dubrov looked at the central gun tower upon which fluttered the crescent flag of Islam. Next to it the antennae of the twentieth century. No wonder they had the upper hand here. They would have to find ways to not just listen but also scramble their

communications. A tall blue eyed man came to greet them. Bal Ganquachar Serinda who bowed slightly and showed them into the conference room covered with patterned wall carpets and windows with wooden shutters.

Around a large table covered with delicious delicacies were set refreshments and an urn of steaming tea. Pleasantries were exchanged while they feasted. But once they had finished their repast of chicken and rice and flat bread a hushed air of expectancy descended. Armed men appeared escorting the two Soviet prisoners whom Dubrov pretended not to recognise. Two of his best operatives. The prisoners were forbidden to speak but looked in good health and were promptly marched out again. Dubrov put his bulky suitcase onto the table and opened it.

All eyes were riveted upon its colourful contents. The notes were duly inspected. Dubrov tried not to show his apprehension. They were satisfied with the money. Serinda asked why there were so many denominations when they had demanded American dollars, the lingua franca of Asia. Dubrov replied that so many American dollars in Afghanistan might depreciate the value of the currency on the black market which caused a ripple of smiles amongst the tough fighters once that had been translated.

They relaxed, more tea was poured, the water pipe lit. Shuja finally had his money Serinda thought. Dubrov was happy because now his department could follow the counterfeit notes with ease. Not even having to be directly involved in tracing its clandestine progress through the dubious money markets of central Asia. The message of the sealed bargain was passed along to others gathered outside. Dubrov heard the blasting of guns as they celebrated the happy conclusion to this most unfortunate business.

Once at Balkh the two Soviet operatives were flown poste haste to Termez to be debriefed. In the meantime Dubrov staid in Balkh allowing himself to become familiar with the fiercely rugged and independent area.

Serinda adhered to the initial plan. The fort was evacuated leaving only a skeleton crew to guard the strategic hill. The defenders had rigged the fort in such a manner as to allow it to appear to be inhabited. Serinda was seasoned and wily enough to expect within a short space of time an attack from the Soviets for the very simple reason that they had retrieved their personnel with such indecent haste. For them to be so compliant in their request of a cool two million was in itself out of the ordinary. Knowing the tight fistedness of the Soviets he had expected negotiations to be drawn out for months on end. That they had settled the matter with such urgency smacked of something far more dangerous than their wish to get this over and done with and amiably at that. No he thought, things had gone far too smoothly and that always meant trouble.

When Colonel Dubrov did return to Kabul he found Utyosov waiting for him at the embassy. They had received another transmission from Moscow. The Soviet Chief of Staff decided this country needed more of their men on the ground to maintain the peace thus securing the harmonious development of the two friendly and sovereign states. Amin still in power refused to cooperate. By now Androponov was planning Amin's removal. He had even gone to the extreme lengths of hiring a team of poisoners to complete the job. So far the crafty Afghan cunningly avoided his would be assassins.

More importantly a GRU dispatch informed them reservists were being called up in Turkestan, Uzbekistan and the whole of the Central Asian military district. The 40<sup>th</sup>

Army Headquarters at Termez were not on full operational alert, linked by satellite to Moscow on a twenty four hour basis with Kabul on the line. The military divisions for Afghanistan with or without Amin's request were put under the capable leadership of General Sergei Sokolov, First Deputy Director and Minister of Defence. Furthermore Sokolov assembled on Dubrov's advice two special divisions of Farsi speaking troops drawn from the republic of Turkemskaja and Uzbekistan, all arrayed in Afghan military gear. Yesterday Amin had been given his last chance to leave quietly and he had firmly refused. Rissala his spokesman had conveyed his message personally to the Soviet Embassy stating such a move would erupt in civil war and endanger the lives of all their people stationed in the country.

Dubrov was confident they would have a responsive leader come what may. But that was neither here nor there for he was now concentrating on his brilliant plan of deception. Military intelligence had convinced the military chiefs of Afghanistan that their army, especially the motorised units combining self propelled guns and tanks were going to be deactivated for a complete refit. They agreed. Progress was running smoothly and over seventy per cent of their tanks were currently inoperative. The military here were led to believe that a push against the rebels would occur early in the year and their men were to have the best equipment for the task. Soon, Dubrov surmised they would strike and liberate the country by stealth and subterfuge if need be, but only when the Afghan army was effectively neutralised and immobile to boost.

It was then Paputin and Zhukov pulled off an even better stunt. Quoting reasons of personnel security these two persuaded Amin to move into the old palace whilst the army was being refitted. It would be best given the rebels could take advantage with the current lull in military activity. At least at the palace he had the best of his own elite

troops to guard his life with the knowledge his own immediate family was secure. He was informed once the army had been refitted and reequipped they would all strike with impunity. To their surprise Amin agreed.

Then at his own request not only did his family move in but he had imported a very stunning woman who entered the precinct under very clandestine circumstances. Whatever would make Amin happy. It would certainly be a jolly Christmas as Dubrov rubbed his hands with glee. The ambassador started to open the first bottle of champagne.

### **Vahnsin**

Savarna for some obscure reason and it was certainly not love, thought of her absent husband. Now Rana, like Varanasi was but a dream. She sank to her knees to thank Kali even though her serpent guides were no more. Yet she still was convinced the goddess was manoeuvring her destiny. She was on the path of the ancient gods having become an acolyte embraced by their powers and their cosmic wisdom. Otherwise she would not have advanced so far in her quest.

Yet this ensorcelled land imbued with its awesome malevolence and deceit was harnessed by a wizardry which tried to threaten her. There would be no reprieve for the mentally indolent or the haughtily ignorant. She thought of Rana. He certainly would not have lasted long here.

The oppressive bulk of the fortress was to Savarna but a supernal effigy, a delusion crafted solely to distract the conquered races from the citadel they actually sought in their demented hatred of its potent ruler. She watched with fascination the night silhouette, incandescent, immersed in dawns ascending rays.

She pressed onwards and passed a boundary stone, a head curiously turned inwards. Its sculpted image was oddly carved, a hideous crouching form neither human nor alien, watching the baleful structure with its twisted staring eyes. She dismissed the unhealthy object out of her mind and continued on her path through the overwhelming rancour of the now putrid swollen jungle. Shaviscara's protection still held. The last she remembered was the crossing of the desert after struggling through the turgid swamps at the edge of this realm.

By evening the towering sorcerous fortress had come to closer. Exhausted she rested her mare and herself in a small depression offering some protection against the icy winds blowing from the northern wastes. The blood red sun sank gibbously behind mountains of mutilated madness rising upon obfuscated wings of diseased lechery, a mocking verisimilitude of Merduk's and Zohex's sagacious contumelity. Savarna checked to see that the small bag of poison was still fastened upon her raiments. The finest grain had only to touch the skin of her chosen enemy to cause an effective and sudden death. That night sleep was a dreary affair and she woke void of energy as if she had battled with an invisible and diabolical burden.

The next day she passed a malodorous semblance of a stony bulwark. Lichen covered rocks, scattered boulders blasted by long forgotten evils lay strewn about the desolate site. Remnants of hued marble hidden in eons of faded time still lingered sinisterly, decaying slowly into oblivion as its cyclopedian foundations sank into the less resistant earth. This wasteland, untrodden, disquieted Savarna wondering if she had not come to some outer vomitory terrain of the wrathful deity Shaviscara had named and warned her of as sentient Death.



The ruins ghastly stillness froze her blood as she sought a safer refuge for the coming night. Already the moon cast its life silently around her, the tumbled stones revealing angles and incursions into space that seemed to draw her beyond herself. She felt its remnant contagion embedded in this diseased architectural creation, mouldering in its own decay. Sheer lethargy made her stay and having dug a small furrow in the drifted sands which had piled up in the corners of the titanic dismembered blocks she rested amongst the ultra primitive ruins.

The heat of the next day harboured an encumbrance which made her feel extremely torpid and uncomfortable. As she made ready for her journey she saw the olden ruins were surrounded by mounted warriors and at first she thought they looked like the riders of Moerdrum. Their steeds though seemed more agile, restless, the horsemen looked fiercer, their yellow brown skin glowed unnaturally, their faces a mask of cruelty. They wore the skins of their prey, lions, lynx, panther, leopard, their jewels sparkled in the dismal sun. A silence cocooned her and the only sound she heard was the clinking of their weaponry as they shifted in their saddles.

“A gift for Zohex.” One of the warriors laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

Savarna looked at them indifferently and rose slowly restraining herself from testing Shaviscara’s magic upon them. She felt a liquescent and ethereal death clinging to them, a wanton and wilful sought indulgence perverted by an enervating magic.

They decided she be blindfolded and so a hood of black material was put over her head then decorously lifted on to her mount. Savarna did not really understand why they kept such excessive secrecy except maybe to intimidate her. As if she cared.

Swiftly did they cover their ground. As they journeyed closer to their destination westward Savarna perceived a hovering perversion recoiling simultaneously. Something

was probing and crawling through her mind, an undefinable, ungraspable, unfathomable irruption sifting her memory. It was locked into her mind, scanning her life, her persona, her ambitions, her dreams, her desires, leaving nothing untouched. It was mind rape. The searching something fired her neurones into playful fires threatening to burn her sanity, mortifying her tethered consciousness. Nature such as it was taking on insensate forms urging upon her shadows of a coruscating demonic intelligence. This certainly was not Death.

Carrion cravings lusted in frenzied pulsations around her but by the powers invested by Shaviscara, kept their distance. These illusions seemed too real and too persistent as she battled with them in demon weighted encumbrances coming as gestating repulsions she barely recognised. Hideous forces etched themselves deep into her mind slowly becoming a part of her. She was loosing the battle. She felt a tearing at her brain dislocating her reason. Terror shrieked vales of nothingness, clamouring winds of chaos immersed her in an overpowering numbness, a heaving cataclysmic sense of vertigo released her from this probing insanity of a grave risen mind.

In a small vault of chiselled from thick perdurable stone two grey figures glid silently into what she thought was her tomb, her deathbed. One of them held back whilst the other moved closer, the face familiar. Her mouth felt parched as she struggled to form words, croaking out something even she could not understand. She tried again but felt so weak that all she managed was a series of blubbering whispers then drifted back into a deep and empty sleep.

Waking she felt refreshed. The room was empty, the light soft and delicate on her eyes outlining the enclosure just tall enough to stand in, wide enough to contain her bed.

An open doorway led into a smudged grey distance. A figure clad in grey entered the room.

“You seem to have recovered.” The melodic voice said. She merely nodded feeling for her ring and talisman still with her.

“You were found at the edge of the desert, verily exhausted.” He paused, “and near death.” She thought that other things had occurred which she could not remember quite so clearly.

“I thought I had been well.” She said weakly.

“On the contrary. You have been in a deep coma but I brought you back, although,” He paused again as if in thought or doubt, “as a follower and devotee of the Devas this is most unusual. Had you trespassed their laws or broken their vows which should find you in such a distressed state?” he asked kindly, almost paternally. She replied with a blank look on her face. Not too fast she reminded herself.

“Perhaps I am taxing your strength. Yet it puzzles me to find you in the condition you are in.” he seemed genuinely perplexed. “Maybe you are under some curse, a penance or maybe a sentence of death.” His voice turning into an intonation of sepulchral forewarning. “And the ring, most unusual for a priestess to even have jewellery. Is it you are a renegade run away from your masters perhaps?” was he mocking her? “When you have recuperated we can talk, in the meantime drink this herbal draught, it will encourage the healing. You have been through many an ordeal and have spoken of things and events which interest me.” And with that he left as silently as he had come.

Turning her aching head she saw her clothes neatly piled on a niche in the wall. Herself wrapped in soft woollen furs. She moved her sore arms and discovered she still had the ring. Then a thought struck her. If they had found the bundle of poison in her

clothes then she was done for. Wondering what was going on. Two mighty wizards, two mad kings both a danger and a menace. Could all this be an astute collusion of diabolical deceit?

But no answer came, she could not even tell if it was the ring or the amulet, Kali or her own will or merely fate that had let her survive this crisis. What was certain was her having been caught in a long and forgotten struggle of power. She feared their ultimate artifices wondering if she had even left the twentieth century and whether her whole adventure was nothing but an autosuggestion of hypnotic spells cast forth by Shuja back at the Afghan cave. If only she did not feel so weak and drowsy. The herbal draught must have taken its effect, she barely registering drinking it. Hazily she turned and saw the crystal beaker in her hand, empty or nearly so. She remembered letting it slip from her hand but never heard it fall to the ground.

Sibilant chants drifted up from beneath dark chambers. Something was beginning as her mind was immersed in its lapping oily waves. It seemed to be of an ancient form that had once roamed the earth. She heard guttural gurgling profanities, the cacophony of strange ululations, the scratching of frenzied beasts, the encroaching and engulfing terrors of stricken victims under the baleful glare of monstrous gods.

As a devotee of Kali she still could not discern if this was even more of the hellish magic of Merduk, Shaviscara or the fever of her ravished mind struggling with some strange drugs. She remembered with some effort why she had come at all to this dubious place. It was not too late to fathom the secrets of their empyrium.

She woke, her limbs stiff from the administered medicines or from the unholy wizardry or the journey itself. Maybe Shaviscara's protection had no strength here. The grey figure returned. Or was it another? She could not tell. Rising as in a trance she was

led, clothed into another room lit from vaulted slits. A continual glow of soft light permeated the tunnels as they passed, her mind too hazy to take it all in. She was given some light food which tasted well and invigorated her and drank a clear liquid which slowly dissipated her foggy head.

The priest smiled but it was only the movement of his mouth, his eyes remained cool and detached. It occurred to her with a creeping sense of suspicion that these people might not be human after all. Her morbid thoughts were cut short when whom she suspected was Merduk, enquired once more after her health. He sat opposite her in the small ante room awaiting her reply.

“It is no accident that I have come to this place.” Savarna ventured preferring to begin the conversation with at least a half truth. A semblance of her disguise could thus still be kept under control and create for the time being an image of authenticity. He merely nodded. “I had also more by chance than by design wandered into the hands of Shaviscara.” She added quickly. He agreed without saying a word. “And his opinion of Merduk is not flattering.” His eyes suddenly transfixed upon her.

“I am Merduk.” He admitted, “I can well imagine what he thinks. We have our differences although all this is in the past.” He added cryptically.

“He thinks you are dangerous.” Savarna confessed.

“It is irrelevant now.”

“But who is right?”

“When it comes to power there is no right or wrong. Things are as they are.” He said blandly. “It is like the weather. There is no good or bad weather. It merely is.”

“But this power he calls...” He held up his hands, free of rings or amulets as if bored, asking Savarna to follow him.

Wondering if he was aware of what Shaviscara thought. Talking of these events as if to him they were in the past. Dismayed with what he already knew and what he had in mind for her.

The convoluted iron wrought lamps shed their nervous shadows over the two silent draped figures in the prayer room. Having prostrated himself the young priest rose and eyed Merduk nervously. He stood there, immobile, hardly daring to approach the man at all thinking he as the very incarnation of Ahriman's will. An idea Merduk did not dispel.

"King Zohex, oh venerable master is preparing for a war against all the renegade tribes. He calls his council of war in his royal chambers and awaits your presence." Then after hesitating added with less gusto that there were soldiers waiting to escort him to the king himself.

"They are, are they?" Merduk replied bemused. "And pray tell, where exactly are they waiting?"

"At the grand entrance."

Merduk's eyes narrowed a fraction as the young priest saw in the dark background through the door an image of a slender woman. He discerned what went through the young priest's mind but said nothing. If the neophyte thought he was following the ways of the king then that was up to him. It did not really matter and he certainly did not care.

"Continue."

The young priest returned his gaze to Merduk. "They have not ventured into the first of the sacred chambers oh master."

Merduk turned and bid the disciple to follow. They walked past the adamite columns, their golden runes testimony to new silent ages. The vast portals were immersed from the smoke of sacrificial fires burning continuously between the gargantuan columns, the flames creating quivering images. The temple seemed in a state of immanent dissolution. They passed the horrific stone carved beasts and towards the outer chamber.

A group of long haired warriors clad in animal hides were assembled, embroidered with flashing armbands, precious jewels, swords fastened, their lances leaning against the temple wall. They were exchanging lurid remarks and bawdy jokes as Merduk and the novice appeared. Their captain a proud vain and an insolent brute stepped forwards, his eyes fiery, corrupt. His mouth contorted into a sneering twisted smile as he said: "Our lord king Zohex," turning his speech into a bellow as if to assure himself of his existence in this frightful place, "demands your immediate attendance and we have come to..."

"Tell your master," Merduk hissed, "that you have just interrupted an important communication which I was about to receive from Ahriman. Have I just broken my sacred meditations only to be bothered by the trivialities you espew before me?!" His eyes narrowed into gleaming daggers. "And if Ahriman is displeased with this coarse interference his distemper will seek you in revenge for this insolence. Tell Zohex that as soon as the communication is finished I will attend his meeting of war." Then returning curtly he walked back into the darkness of the foul smelling temple.

"Zohex will hear of this." The brute retorted now not so sure of himself while his soldiers tried to calm him down. It was blasphemy to contradict the archimage. The captain instead decided to kick the soldier who had spoken thus in the groin. His howl of pain echoed through the temple much to the amusement of his comrades in arms.

Merduk's certainty that Zohex meant to utterly destroy the renegades was now becoming a reality. He must have obtained intelligence of the end of Lethena and Moerdrum and was aching to fill the power vacuum thus created. With Shaviscara gelded Zohex would not be able to resist expanding his empire. This alone was enough to bring the disaster waiting to happen upon his head. It was enough to enliven Merduk to see Zohex finally rush to his doom. He might actually win the first few battles but what Zohex refused to see was that the renegades had Vahnsin surrounded. And the enigmatic masters at Elburz were waiting patiently for the moment to make a move upon Vahnsin as well.

Then there was the tenuous connection via the Deep Visionaries and the technology of Regum to have himself and this entity here at all. He doubted the DVs had enough energy to manipulate Zohex's enemies into submission. Let alone charge Zohex with greater psychic powers to become the dominant force here. They were busy keeping this such as they were. Furthermore if Zohex struck south towards the Dravidians he would have even more beings off side. That would drain the DVs. If he went east into Shaviscara's eviscerated realm it might hasten the end through the greater entropy, the negative forces which both rulers and wizard used to subdue their enemies. Zohex by overreaching himself was dispersing not gathering what limited strength he did possess. As such Merduk was relieved he was not on the same wavelength as Zohex. Let Zohex do his worst. It would be his last declamation. Maybe he as Merduk was destined to become the prime mover once this pathetic tragedy was over. Maybe.

He descended the stairs signalling the novice to fetch the woman then return to his devotions. It felt like the end game, the final line of the finished equation, the restablelisation of the energy matrix in this fated realm. From what little Merduk did



know of Earth, he being Prima's best exo-biologist, this mythological realm was barely remembered at all. That gave him hope.

Savarna appeared, the novice bowed then retreated.

"There is something I want you to see." And they both descended the stairs to the small cavern which housed the Well of Darkness. A connection to their galaxy but not the home planet. That too was puzzling with Merduk too cautious to follow its energised trajectory. Whether Ahriman existed at its bottom was pure conjecture. Merduk understood though that it was an artifice of Zohex's. He also comprehended that Zohex was an artifice of the DVs who were under the orders of the Domain Lords. How all this had to do with containing Regum's expanding WebSpace was not yet clear. Perhaps at the other end of this shaft of dark energy resided a repository of even greater power and that somehow linking this to Earth would in a way curtail Regum's expansion. Maybe corrupt it so that it collapsed leaving the field, space, free for Zohex to fashion according to his own dreams of conquest. Strangely enough this did not shock him outright for he had a feeling this was only a future and not yet the future. If he could use Savarna to further complicate matters for Zohex then fortune did seem to smile upon him.

He placed the black mandala over the aperture. Now the artefact would absorb what was gestating in their galaxy and perhaps curtail what was emanating from this world. Dark matter was a dangerous field. It was more than just substantial matter. It was configured ether. The mandala a stop gap to slow the process, absorb the discord, retard Zohex's incursions into both space and time and hopefully curtail the aims of the DVs who through the Domain Lords wished to align Earth to their planet's resonance.

Merduk assured Savarna they were safe within this adamite temple impregnated with the lost spells of Hyperboria. To gain credibility he claimed to be the last and the

sole guardian of its infinite though dispersed power. Busying himself to refocus the ancient deadly potency, dispersing the convulsions unleashed by Zohex to disintegrate his delusionary visions of global conquest.

Gazing intently upon the mandala they saw the hieroglyphs glow. A code revealing the secrets of the hidden domain way beyond the stars of this galaxy. Maybe Merduk hoped integrating the field that was Regum's WebSpace as well so that when the time came Merduk was master of that domain and not Zohex. The trick was to align oneself with the state of the holy ether, the magical force that held the universe together. What his home planet Prima thought of as the Ultimate Consciousness. As Ahriman on Earth. Though thanks to Zohex more of his image than that of the ether's sentient content. So Merduk concentrated on the immensity of both past and future contracting into the ever moving, ever mutating present and deny Zohex his frightful lore of another cosmos. Savarna just sat there meditating.

They both felt the expanding field within the pulsing mandala. Expanding within them, suspending time as it embraced space. The chamber resonant with its yawning emptiness for Merduk wanted to ascertain its base state. Not its contents. Still his mind was fired by ageless emanations quivering at the brink of creation. The advent of an unknown genesis. Zohex's dark design well hidden.

The expanded field, itself a veritable miniature universe at the other end irradiated the chamber in its eerie darkness fusing Merduk with its issuance. Locked resonantly through his linked mind as galaxial power roared and stars sparked around him.

Merduk was but a faint adumbration of darkness to Savarna. His substance though bonding with what she felt was a field, a web of the mandala. Strangeness. He was allowing her to follow the path into and beyond the abyss. To her the very elements were

collapsing, transforming into a pliable glowing though indeterminate state. A future potentiality. Felt herself in touch with Shiva the Destroyer and Creator where the stuff of the universe was a mere membranous vibration.

The contact made, the stellar infusion was now pouring into the mandala and into their attuned minds. The transmutation drawing upon life and upon itself. Itself? Was Zohex present at the other end? It appeared so. Time to stop the process. The spiral galaxy and its dark orb from whence Zohex emanated, being in more than one place at a time was enough to know for now. He ceased meditating allowing divergent reality to reassume its ebb and flow. It was enough for the lingering aura, the remnant resonance of Zohex's data realm, another surprise, to recede into the artefact. So Zohex was a construct of the Deep Visionaries. No they were only guides. Zohex's resonance was both stronger and yet more diffuse. A simulacrum of the Deep Visionaries. So whence came the persona? Self created? What an unholy mess. What was Prima up to?

### **Balkh**

"Martin my friend. We have been totally sidelined." Max said. Not despondently just as a matter of fact. They were sitting around their make shift camp in one of Tuqlaq's underground warren. Sitting on some rickety chairs around an old school table. Behind them each had a string based bed, rugs and their sleeping bags along with their gear. Martin was still making notes he had from Kathmandu but Max, since the debacle at the cave had given up. For him this chase for the 'cylinders', the mysterious 'seals', the

fantastic writings of Abysmus seemed all too irrelevant in the here and now. There were no ancient reclusive gods waiting in the wings to come swooping back in from who knows where to reclaim a mythological status in a world that had moved on, for millennia.

“Yes. You could say that. With your mentor dead it seems we have come to a dead end. Even though we’re in the middle of it. Then of course there is that pesky problem of money.”

“What started off as something ultramundane has become, if anything, weird.”

“Weird?” Martin was puzzled.

“As in Yehensho.”

“Yehensho.” Martin mystified. He had forgotten about him. Seemed to have melted in with the locals.

“I don’t think he’s the Buddhist he pretends to be.”

“No. Well he never wore the saffron robe.” As if that explained anything.

“You reckon he’s one of them?”

“An Afghan. Could be.”

“You reckon they’ll let us go?”

“Yep.”

“You sound certain.”

“When this is all over. They are an honourable people. A deal’s a deal.”

Max looked at Martin askance. “Glad you think so. I feel like we’ve been dropped into a big bucket of shit.”

“Max you’re smelling like roses.”

“Maybe but I’m dying of boredom.”

“Run out of gear?” referring to Max’s stash.

“And nothing to drink except tea and water. I want out of here. Go to a pub, see a band, see women, get rotten, all the things that mean something in life.”

“Funny how things have turned out. And I don’t even feel anything for Rosenberg’s demise, that of Praj’s either. As if they never were.” Which disturbed Martin.

“Yeah. Strange that. I’m more worried how it all spiralled out of control. We are lucky you know.”

“Lucky. Yes, maybe.”

“Coming so close and now it’s all useless.”

“How’s that?”

“Physically I mean. Somewhere there is a gate to some ancient beings. Someone locked them out. Permanently. And Rosenberg wanted them back in.”

“Maybe it is for the best. Not too comfortable having gods rule. We’re not peasants anymore.”

“True.”

“Just wondering what to do with my thesis.”

“Oh that.”

“Yes that.” Martin’s face a furrow. “All was supposed to be revealed.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And what Martin. I’m a little lost here.”

“Well it started out so positive. Then all went downhill the moment we came here.”

“You can say that again. Luckily it won’t mean diddley squat.”

“There’s still the happenings at Napier.”

“Well that’s there. This is here. You don’t think there’s a connection?”

“Well, an ancient race may be behind certain events in Napier. The aborigines Dreamtime culture heroes. What if it’s these ancient beings Rosenberg was concerned with?”

“You mean we should be there instead of here?” Having said that Max laughed. “That is funny Martin. I must admit. If these beings exist then they certainly hoodwinked the Great Man. He took all that mythology too literally. They might have been around here once but who’s to say they haven’t changed their minds and moved on?”

“On as in Australia or on as in cosmically?”

“Both.”

“Yeah that clears things up. Maybe these enigmatics are searching for special places of power, that’s how the aborigines see it and well, they were testing their powers in the Outback.”

“With one slight problem Martin. Why would they want to kill people or make them disappear? You know like ahm UFO abductions?”

“Maybe those unfortunates were hostile. Maybe their presence were...I don’t know.” Martin sighed. “You got a point. Why go for the negative?”

“Unless they’re psychotic.”

“Maybe they are cursed. Yeah.”

“So you can see why this might all be good news?”

“As in...?”

“Us being out of the picture Martin.”

“I won’t give up the theoretical end. Condense it back into aboriginal mythology and leave it at that.”

“Well the wheels have fallen off, the engine’s conked out and the driver’s dead.”

“Darkness attracts darkness.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Rosenberg and his quest. Instead of resurrecting insane gods he attracted his own doom.”

“Scary stuff. I am glad I’m here then.” Max acting relieved.

“Are you linked to those who backed him?”

“Through third parties.”

“Well Max, I think these people are dangerous.”

“Hm.”

They heard the shuffling of feet and the swishing of robes approach. It was Tuqlaq and a small retinue. He motioned for them to remain seated.

“Friends, it is time to go.” He simply said.

Their eyes lit up.

“You are pleased?”

“Yes, very much so. You have been most gracious and kind in giving us shelter, in making us welcome considering the circumstances. And we cannot even repay you. We are truly in your debt.” Max being the diplomat.

“Thank you. You will be escorted by these men.” He gestured behind him. Their faces were neutral, expressionless. They were armed.

“When will we leave if I may ask?” Max enquired.

“When you have gathered your possessions.”

“Excellent. We are ready.” Looking at Martin who nodded. “I guess it must be night time.”

“It is.”

“What about the notes of Rosenberg? You wish to keep them?”

Martin looked surprised.

“If only to light the camp fire.” Tuqlaq grinned.

Martin felt this an opportune moment. He was feeling superstitious. Darkness attracting darkness. He rose, fumbled in his rucksack and retrieved a thick wad of paper. He handed them to Tuqlaq.

“You will not miss them?” The Afghan said solemnly.

“Rosenberg was on a false trail.”

Tuqlaq merely nodded as he retrieved the bundle of papers. “Thank you. It is as Allah wishes it.”

His men praised Allah.

“I doubt if he really understood the full significance of his discoveries and the subsequent speculations he then manufactured.” Tuqlaq passing judgement.

“In this we agree.” Max replied.

“Once in Kabul there might be a person who wishes to speak with you. His name is Hanballi.”

“Really?” Max’s turn to be surprised.

“He is a friend.”

Max felt relieved. No last bullet then.



“All will be well. So if there is anything else...? Please be ready.”

“Certainly. And thank you again.” Max hiding his relief. Martin thanked him and his people as well.

The night was overcast taking the edge out of the freezing conditions. Tuqlaq's guides could see in the dark like night owls. They found trails and tracks where Martin and Max saw nothing but rubble. They passed silently through valleys and crossed rivers where others might have been reluctant to venture. With such exceptional knowledge of the land it was easy to understand why even Alexander the Great had his own difficulties in overcoming the local chieftains around ancient Bactria. The battle for the Greeks had been difficult. Enough to demoralise Alexander's troops to such an extent that by the time they faced the armies of India they instead turned back. Just as they were.

As morning dawned, they reached the safety of the bazaar of Balkh. The sky a steely grey. There were Afghani soldiers everywhere. But Tuqlaq had made the precaution that both Max and Martin were dressed in local garb. No one bothered them.

### **Vahnsin**

Savarna had no choice but to follow Merduk. Abominations clawed towards her seeking entry into her frantic state of mind. She felt disoriented even though Kali and Shaviscara were supposed to be protecting her. She felt whispering coercing invisible terrors bending light and darkness into pandemonic confusion. Hidden in covert forms unholy things and diabolical suggestions sought to trespass those subterranean chambers. Then when these damned dark inscrutable things threatened her totally, having it seemed to her attained their excruciating zenith did the eroding charms and warding spells of Shaviscara nullify and return to oblivion the hell spawned fiends.

Merduk led her through a maze of twisted configurations captured in solid rock. In the background whined a distant almost human sound. The walls were bare. Here was nothing but an absorbing horror of alien proportions, impingements of a mute captivity

grafted into the silent stonework. Sparse light entered from above silhouetting Merduk whereby he vanished and reappeared as she followed him.

They came at last to an open enclosure and she saw with relief the light of day. The sun was trying to penetrate a thick veiling haze that absorbed the light casting no shadow. The walls of the courtyard had crazed lines etched into them leading the resisting eye onwards. Arresting the mind into somnolent solitude. It was a unique and eccentric design. On closer inspection she saw the walls to be utterly flat and smooth, their multidimensional incremented bass reliefs suggestive of secretive articulations, semblances of an imagined hell.

She saw blossoming flora hanging torpidly about them. A smell of decay mingled with a warm, pungent, oozing suffocating heat, the air heavy with stupefying fragrances. They sat upon two small benches. Merduk faced her with a faint smile even though his expression lost none of its distant preoccupation.

“I feel your resistance.” His silken voice filled the small space.

“Apprehension. Survival. Safety first. I adapt by degrees to a new environment and once satisfied there is no danger I then open myself and fathom the nature of whatever reality it is I am in.” feeling a little more certain.

“Wise.”

“Have you any idea what Shaviscara is planning?”

Merduk was listening.

“He wishes to kill you, through me.” Merduk raised an eyebrow calmly assenting the revealed fact. Savarna continued, “I have been given a powder, a poison, it is missing.” Which she just found out.

He pulled out a small bundle from his grey tunic.

“Are you not wary of assassins who may wish to dispose of you?” She asked perturbed at his indifference.

He laughed and the walls re-echoed a clamouring ululating insanity.

“No. If I were, he would have destroyed me a long time ago.”

“What is going on?”

“Between Shaviscara and myself?”

“Yes. But also here. You see I come from another time where something has been discovered buried for an eternity and created I suspect in this time here.”

“There is a power which Shaviscara wants, desired even by Dauthus or is that Lethena and even Zohex. And now you as well.” He fell silent then adding as an afterthought, “And the priests at Elburz who wish to return it into silent oblivion.”

“It is said you guard this power so as to rule unchallenged by any for eternity.”

“Is that so? If I guard this it is because no other is qualified to approach it. Then again neither are the priests at Elburz going to deny it. It exists and this in itself is all that matters. Shaviscara like Zohex is hungry for mere physical strength. Like the others who once dominated their various realms I give them enough to satisfy their cravings. But it is never enough so no one,” he threatened, his eyes flashing, “has the right to this source.”

“Meaning?”

“Annihilation. Moerdrum is no more.”

Savarna gasped immediately followed by a sigh of relief. There was no need then for her murderous mission to be executed. But how had he achieved that? The city and its kingdom had been...or had they voided reality to keep in her mind the semblance of its continuation? Hoping with Merduk’s demise and that of Zohex to regain their lost power? Most likely.

“Signs are appearing, cracks are dismembering the very space amongst the stars. The Earth is trembling under an alien incursion and these fools for kings think it is part of their glorious power which unleashes lesser destruction. They think their course of action will guarantee them not just dominion over space and over life but over time and the future itself.” He sighed dramatically as if to emphasise his point, then continued, “and so I aim to take this power unto myself. It is the only sane thing to do.”

“You mentioned Elburz. Our ancient lore records a distant almost invisible fraternity of knowledgeable priests who had vanished after the destruction of Baktria when the Solar Kings destroyed the worshippers of the Dark Moon.”

“Is that how it is remembered by your race?” He suddenly became curious.

“Only a few know of this.”

“I do not worship anything. To worship is to fall into a maze of self created delusions. Zohex worships himself and his power. He prays to the waning moon to aid the destruction of his enemies. He is successful but he does not realise that the more he pours his energies into his destructive expression of force, the weaker he actually becomes. When the cataclysm will finally descend he will be powerless to stop the events he has created. But it is already too late. As for the priests at Elburz they wish to seal this temple the link between this planet and the seraphic heavens thinking thereby to remedy this evil called into creation. No such luck. The source if left to itself will continue to grow hidden though it might be. Even if it is sealed within complex spells binding it to this space and time it would merely atrophy and bring forth something even,” thinking of where it was focussed upon in his galaxy, “greater.”

“Could it not be dissipated?” Savarna wanting access before it became too dangerous to approach.

A deep groan beneath the earth arrested her speech. Merduk fell silent listening to something in the distance. Dust filled the thick noxious air. A stench rose from the abandoned vaults below. The disturbance shook the massive walls, cracks formed sending fine swirls of masonry over them. The earth was shifting, repulsed by a primeval resonance it wished to expel. The stench was strong and nauseating as the swaying shifting ground came to a rest. Around her a deadly silence. The wan glow above had grown imperceptibly lighter even though the voluminous clouds pouring upwards into the blighted sky should have diminished the sun's radiance. Merduk saw Savarna looking up at the light and reading her mind said, "That is not the sun. This is night. We have had no nightfall for some time." She knew he was hiding something from her.

Too true. Merduk was equally puzzled by this dull shining orb which grew incrementally. He was no astronomer but sensed it was not a star coming this way. The warlords and Zohex saw it as an omen come to obliterate their enemies or if not that then give them strength for that very same aim. Had it been a star the turmoil here would have been catastrophic. Whatever it was it was not natural.

"Could it come from Shaviscara?" she asked as several priests robed in gritted garments entered. No one spoke. They looked at each other then left as silently as they had entered.

"Telepathy?" she asked.

"We know what we think. Thus words cannot confuse our ideas. Our minds remain pure. But we have not much time and I must prepare my work. But to answer your question. No this is not the work of Shaviscara. He never had the strength to summon something like this." Wondering if this had something to do with Regum's WebSpace. A probe most likely. Well let them see what they want. It would make no

difference unless it was some sort of retrieval vehicle. Disguised as an orb. Anything was possible in WebSpace.

“Is it the approach of the abyss?” then added, “Which ought to be dark.”

“No not that. A sign. A portentous omen for those who understand its significance.” Even though he was only guessing. Unless projected by the DVs. Yet since its effect was as yet minimal it meant it was neutral, not hostile. It could even be a micro orbital. Yet the thing was real in its own way.

Rising he walked through the small doorway in the wall which she had not previously noted. She followed Merduk.

They stood at the edge of the bastion towering above the countryside. It looked remarkably similar to that of Balkh where Shuja had his deserted citadel with its mysterious cavern and the artefact. The mountains to the south and west were of lesser height. This citadel dominating the land. To the south misty clouds seeped over whatever had shaken this younger earth rising menacingly into the sky. Even so the smeared yellow glow reflected through the mists cast a septic glow over the tarnished land.

“A light to challenge the sun, the moon, eclipsing all.” Merduk thought out aloud. He could not reveal the truth so he dissembled. “It has been written in resurrected lore that when the moon is devoured then so will the powers on earth. Zohex thinks it will be the signal to send out his blood lusting hordes to rape once more the continent and its stricken people. In reality it foretells of their own end. Even as the light from above draws nigh, the earth shrieks in rising to meet it. What is natural has been forced into an unnatural event. It is a matter of days at most.” Hoping his speculations were correct.

“Our legends are full of cosmic battles.” Savarna half whispered.

Merduk’s interest reawakened.

“Take me to the centre of your inner temple,” Savarna began but Merduk readily assented her request. She would make no difference. “Have I not been honest with you, enlightening you in regard to Shaviscara’s plot who wished you dead. Revealed freely?”

“And were you not in agreement to murder me when you were with Shaviscara?”

“And I tell you Shaviscara would have had me sacrificed. Then of course there is Lethena.” A bit desperate.

“Yes. A potent spirit urging Shaviscara on. Controlling Dauthus. An unholy trinity of no consequence.”

“They said you crave the power of Death itself. Or maybe Zohex I can’t clearly remember. Is it true that either of you want to dominate Earth with this aboriginal terror?”

Merduk simply shook his head.

“It is the guardian of life destroying only degenerate life forms. All others pass over into the continuum that is the universe, then remanifest as sentients to continue the journey.”

Savarna understood what he meant. It was not that different to her concept of reincarnation. Then he surprised her.

“Come. If the centre of power is your quest I cannot see how it will create any harm. It will be interesting to see if there is a difference since you say you come from another time. Hopefully Zohex has no need of me now he is planning his strike back, his agenda to cleanse the land of the rebels.”

In the dank grey sky the inserted glow of the celestial object continued to gain in luminescence, bathing the land in an eerie creamy pallor. Savarna looked at it with a measure of distrust. Then commented, “Our ancient records recount a battle concerning the gods of the sky.” Thinking of her heritage. “Who usurped the moon and the sun,



entrenching the Earth in darkness lasting months on end. Convulsions shook mountains to the ground. Scorched were the lands, burnt the living beings, oceans boiled and vanished, mountains appeared where there had previously been plains. The survivors were driven into caves and civilisations were vandalised in one mighty blow.”

They were still in the rank warm garden. Savarna almost mystified by the approaching orb behind a thick veneer of glowing clouds. She could almost taste its presence in her head. There was something familiar about it. Then she sensed Merduk had similar thoughts. Though he kept his grasping supposition in check. It was as if he too felt its approach as a familiarity, of a foreordained process instigated by this object which would unlock something stupendous. It was not necessarily inimical to him. How Zohex would react, how it would react with Zohex was another matter. But Merduk realised for the moment that when that moment came there would a watershed. Zohex would be cleaved off and Merduk become his own master. Still inserted by the Reganians but not necessarily furthering Prima’s aims. He was looking forwards to that moment. It was therefore certain that that cavity exuding or embracing the dark light from his universe could be the process by which the two worlds were united. Through the mysterious effluvium that was this dark light. He felt better. What made him feel worse a moment later was Savarna’s mythology harking back to a scorched Earth.

“And you say it was successful? The planet ruined, parched, cities demolished, oceans evaporated by an act of powerful forces who you remember as revengeful gods.”

“Indeed.”

“These gods you speak of could be sentients from elsewhere.” Merduk considering this coming orb. It could be anything. The bright semblance of a star mere camouflage. An orbital for instance. That thought had crossed his mind before. The

Reganians were capable of that but whether they could move one across space to here was an act of technological achievement which would have devastating consequences for Prima's objectives. But then the Reganians had moved both Zohex and himself across the same wide gulf. So an orbital by design would merely require more energy. And if the Reganians had that then Merduk would have to make his mind up soon with whom he wished to be with.

They observed the dismal belching clouds glow preternaturally with the unusual light that hung over them. That is how the priests interpreted it. Merduk was in no mood to explain to them anything at all. Maybe Vahnsin was doomed. It would not be missed.

"To the others," Merduk confided to Savarna, "I explain that the appearance of a new star may have terrible consequences if Zohex continues as he does, and will. It could be anything." Looking at her. But Savarna was preoccupied with gaining her objective. The energy stream which united two worlds. Accept Merduk had not as yet ascertained what exactly was at the other side. It certainly was not inimical. Just a potency focussing here onto Earth. Maintaining a link. At best a beacon for the orb, nothing more. Yet he had meditated near its presence and had experienced many worlds, many realms, peopled with many beings. Which he construed as many possibilities. Something to be kept away from Zohex.

"I cannot vouchsafe what you will experience Savarna."

"I am prepared."

"This sanctum is...unique."

Savarna decided to come out with it. "It is said in fabled lore there exists a missing tablet engraved with mysterious runes affecting the mind and written in symbols not dissimilar to the columns of your outer temple."

Merduk stopped and fixed his grey eyes upon her. This tablet it occurred to him could only be the jump gate. Whether it glowed hieroglyphics he could not remember when removing himself, with Zohex from doomed Tellurium. Maybe it did. Like all computer driven devices it could be status lights, ongoing processors being active or formulae ensuring as a control that the transfer was on the right track. A computational terminal whose inner engine was working smoothly. As for affecting the mind, who knew what confabulations their ancient memories had conjured.

“It could be anything Savarna.” He answered vaguely. Savarna would be in for a shock because the jump gates, whilst in a ready status somewhere in space with a preordained space reserved for them, aligned no doubt to his and Zohex’s resonance would be of no benefit to Savarna. “The tablet only appears to those who are worthy of it.” That should do nicely, put it into its current context. Her mythology was certainly under some peculiar misapprehensions. None which he would correct. He sighed. It was a pity really that he had to watch Zohex. Studying the lore of early Earth would make for a fascinating diversion. But time was not on his side.

“That means what?”

“This tablet only appears when certain conditions are right.”

Savarna was shocked. She had assumed it was an object. Wondering now if somehow she had made a monumental mistake. But then she had been certain Shuja had the tablet. She had seen it placed over the Well of Darkness in Afghanistan. Unless it had been extricated from here to there. She hoped not. The blood had left her face. She was in shock. Feeling weak, wishing to collapse and vanish from this accursed plot. What then had taken Abu? That had been no hallucination. He had been rent apart by the beasts guarding the entrance to the abyss. It was all a bit too confusing. Had she gone off in the

wrong direction and now was, unless Merduk helped, stuck here, close to cosmic oblivion.

“Is not the tablet your guidance to achieve the future you desire?” Nearly desperate. Afraid of being lost here. No wonder he had let her into the temple. She barely remembered following him. Merduk merely looked at her. Ah well a little of the truth would not hurt.

“No. Not in itself. The only power there is is your occult mind. Maybe in later ages the elders may have sealed the opening with a tablet of their own.” The very thing which she did not want to hear. It meant staying and she was desperate to avoid whatever was approaching in the sky. Her mythology remembered the near destruction of the world by sinister forces battling the luminous star dragon. There was too much information. Her mind in a swirl.

“Anyway your presence as in coming from the future is proof enough that the human race survived in ways not anticipated by some.” Which meant Prima’s objective had not succeeded. “The tablet is therefore an event still to come.”

Savarna’s heart sank. All this way and now, emptiness. She was too despondent to feel the rage, the futility of it all. What had been those revelations then back in Varanasi? Was the past then all make believe? If so she was devastated. No wonder the west considered it all mere stories. Fantastic but stories just the same. Maybe drug fuelled visions. The past a creative illusion. With no substance. She nearly slumped to the ground. Merduk looked at her curiously. She was obviously struggling with something.

They reached the inner sanctum of the dread gods. Or were they mere phantoms as well, praying on occult minds? If you believe then so it shall be. The ultimate delusion. Well might as well check out what this well was on about here. She followed Merduk

like a sleepwalker hearing in the dark the sibilant chants pervading the clammy air. Merduk excused himself and spoke with a priest at the outer chamber. Savarna was confused. He returned and they strode off to an outer chamber where he then parleyed with a small group of soldiers.

The tablet then Savarna trying to come to grips distractedly was not what it appeared. What people thought. It was merely a seal. And that infantile academic Tamralipti and his western friends, not to mention her dumb husband, then again maybe not, had removed the seal at some time. Only to have it returned. She had seen Shuja with it. And here Merduk insisted it was not. So perhaps it was the Well that was of importance. It just had to be. But if the tablet had been removed would that not dissipate its energy over the long ages? Well she was sick of thinking. She was here now. Merduk was allowing her access. Was she then some kindred soul in his mind?

When he returned he had a novice in tow. What next?

“This young man will make sure we are not disturbed.” They exchanged glances.

“Maybe you will solve the mystery.” Merduk hinted.

“Of what? The missing tablet? The Well? Its source?”

“Yes.”

“And you have not?”

“Ah. It is a long story. The short of it is there are many paths regarding the future of this planet. And I assume anywhere in the universe as well. Now somewhere along the way the human race managed its own evolutionary metempsychosis. Having achieved an exalted mindfulness others went to follow the dark, the occult, other worlds present in this one. Now this evolution was more than just, mentally that is, the coincidental accumulation of adaptive accidents. Rather was the, back then, conscious focussing of

psychic power and its attendant will to supersede the forces of mute matter. Self enhancement. Your predecessors retrieved from the inveterate forces enmeshed in the physical realm the quest for the infinite. Somehow your species managed to connect with something vast. It could well be that this link is present here. The tablet may have been a summation of that process so that whoever possesses it has access to the infinite.”

Merduk coming to realise that there may be a confusion due to the presence of the jump gate, hidden, and what probably occurred after. The tablet absorbing the energy of the well to its distant source. It would be interesting what Savarna made of this.

They reached the inner sanctum where desultory mists hung in heavy obscurity about them. Savarna just hoped that what had occurred in her own time, those near malignant visions, had been a preliminary step towards what awaited her here. She almost felt, by the memory the threatening moan of forces both of and not of this universe.

## **Kabul**

Hanballi watched the Indian Airlines Boeing 727 with the remaining two westerners race down the runway. Wispy clouds of fine powdery snow stirred by the thrust of its two jet engines as they pushed the plane into the sky. Kabul’s surrounding mountains looked majestic in the clear wintry sky.

Noting how airport security had been increased. The laxness of the troops was gone and attentive soldiers with their now Soviet APC’s were everywhere but the tanks were gone. At least the two Australians were out of the way. Safe. After talking to them

the story they had related was so outlandish as to defy logic and reason. On their way to Delhi.

Other more immediate problems bedevilled him. He had spoken with Shuja's commander at Maza-e-Sharif whilst escorting the two foreigners back to Kabul. His men reported an influx of Afghan soldiers in their area, all speaking Farsi. His suspicions aroused Hanballi checked with the local army headquarters who had directed him to an officer on Amin's staff. Residing in the old palace. And fobbed off with some trite explanation. Hanballi drew his own conclusions remembering to meet with Amin.

Settling himself at the opulent bar, Amin sat like a man very much at ease with himself. He had his companion, a stunning dark eyed, dark haired slender beauty. Hanballi had suggested she might be a plant but Amin with his amiable smile reassured him she had been thoroughly vetted. Her home Bombay.

"Troops have been sighted in the north and the army claims they know nothing about this." Hanballi said outright. Amin poured him a good measure of scotch, neat.

"It is a security measure, beyond army jurisdiction." Amin replied putting ice into his drink. They sipped in silence for a few moments. Hanballi stared out of the window into the crystal clear blue sky. A perfect winter's day.

"A lot of activity at the airport." Hanballi probed, draining his glass. Amin poured him another measure. Apart from the palatial bodyguards they were alone in the large bar and cocktail lounge. The woman looked bored.

"Yes. The Soviet 105<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Division have arrived from Bagran. They are securing the airport against a possible rebel incursion." Amin answered flatly.

Speaking with Hanballi because he was the link to the northern tribes. An area assuming crucial importance.

“Then why are the tanks being refitted at present?” Hanballi flared. He knew he was a valued double informer. So did Amin who for a change kept the dialogue open with the people outside the cities. And Hanballi had excellent sources at his disposal.

The slender woman shook her shining black mane and left the two of them to talk shop seating herself near the window. Hanballi watched her to see if she would make any suspicious moves but she merely stared out of the window. She fiddled with her handbag and checked her immaculate face in a small bejewelled hand mirror.

Silence. Hanballi noted that things were too quiet now the Soviets had retrieved their own people in Balkh. And Shuja’s men had two of their cool million. The Soviets parting with money just like that disturbed him. Had they bought them off he wondered. That would give them what they wanted, placating them whilst Amin tried to hedge his bets. Was he planning to take over the country with Soviet military aid?

The next day they met again. This time Amin had Rissala with him. Who was agitated because he had discovered the airspace in eastern Afghanistan was crammed with Soviet Alyushins and Antonov transports. It looked like the militarisation of the country by a foreign power. Amin assured them both he was securing the land against the coming rebel attacks. But something still bothered Hanballi for Amin had officially refused extra Soviet personnel to enter the country.

“Electronic surveillance is at a maximum.” Hanballi pressed. “Especially that of our Soviet friends who are busy relaying messages via Termez, their southern satellite base. And whilst we are being kept busy with internal problems our friends keep us in the dark regarding external matters. I don’t like it. I dropped in on the Soviet embassy this



morning where there were nothing but new faces. They must have rotated their whole staff.”

Amin glanced up. “Our Soviet friends as you say are keeping an eye on Zia. He has recently been courting both the Chinese and the Americans. The Soviets want to know what he is up to, for our sake.”

“Sabre rattling for what Zia might be up to? Intending to destabilise Pakistan from this end? That means they might also have plans for the Pathans, maybe the whole North West Frontier Province and using our land, our sovereignty as a base for their operations. This is evil.” Rassali said. “What do you intend to do Amin?” It was a dangerous situation.

“Let us celebrate.” Amin smiled flashing his gold tooth.

“Celebrate?” Rissala asked incredulously.

“To our generous Soviet friends. They train our army, reequip our tanks, instruct us in the arts of modern warfare which will give us the know how necessary to secure our future and maintain our independence. It might displease the west, especially Carter, but...” He left the sentence in mid air and shrugged his shoulders at the inevitability of politics.

“Though I am in sympathy with our people I do not like to see civil war in this country either. Give the tribes too much independence, the result is anarchy and our authority is compromised. It is the government which must rule and rule firmly. We make no demands on them except to keep the peace. We do not even mind the way they settle their internal disputes but we cannot let the land slip back into the feudalism of the past. Soon they would raid the trucks bringing in our necessary goods and sell them at

inflationary prices. It would spell economic ruin for us all, destabilise the government which would in turn be exploited by foreign interests.” Amin recited to them.

“Like the Russians for instance.” Hanballi said caustically lighting a cigarette. Amin ignored the remark and finished his drink. He seemed to be living in the cocktail lounge.

“The Soviets are useful for us at the moment. Take Nepal. They receive aid from India, the Soviet Union, China, the United States. Does that hurt them? Their location is far more important than ours. Look at Bhutan or Kashmir where they played off the foreign powers. I do not intend to let this land slide into any pitfall. Another drink gentlemen?”

“Welcome colonel comrade.” Dubrov shook hands with Colonel Bayernou. “How is school?” He added jovially since the man was the head of the KGB’s Terrorist Training School in Moscow. Bayernou, a military man with no humour and a dour face did manage a tight smile, nodding that things were going exceptionally well. Dubrov passed him a generous glass of vodka, introduced him to Marshal Zhukov and Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin, in their embassy lounge.

“My aides.” Dubrov laughed. “What news from Sokolov?”

“The airlift is completed. The BMD armoured personnel carriers are in place around Kabul backed by the 85<sup>th</sup> division surrounding the Darulaman Palace. I presume Amin is still there.”

Dubrov nodded.

“Good, we are ready.” Downing another shot.

“The rebels virtually have this country in their control comrade Bayernou. You do realise that?” The latter affirmed the fact. “Paputin has made contingencies for their neutralisation.”

“I am worried about the Afghan army.” Bayernou worried.

“No problems there comrade. Paputin is a genius. He managed to convince the Afghan chiefs of staff that it would be in their interest we refit their tanks and associated weaponry so that they can increase their firepower against the rebels. Virtually all their tanks are immobilised.”

“I congratulate Paputin.” They all raised their glasses and drained the warm invigorating contents. “To mother Russia.”

“We had better call in the ambassador since he will have some explaining to do.” Dubrov said expansively. Pressing the intercom he asked the still sleepy secretary to inform Utyosov his presence was required.

“Ambassador,” Dubrov began amiably as the tall man appeared in the well lit but blacked out secure living room. “We have important news to convey to you from the Politburo, the Ministry of Defence, the Defence Council, the International Department and my directorate.” Utyosov sat down and took the offered glass absentmindedly. He knew the confirmation established the last few days was to become at last an actuality. And protocol demanded an official announcement.

“Our plan to secure Afghanistan is now in operation. We will neutralise the rebels. Government troops will establish peace in the cities. The army will demolish the insurgents and allow this country to continue along the path set out by the Friendship Treaty of our two sovereign nations. Kabul is secure, the Darulaman Palace surrounded. Amin will presently step down and announce a new president, Barback Kamal. He will

request under the Friendship Treaty our assistance in pacifying the land. Needless to say it has the blessing of both Brezhnev and Andropov.” Dubrov explained.

“At last.” Utyosov ventured sipping his drink. “I had always mistrusted Amin but of course kept such ideas to myself. I do not think President Carter will be too pleased.” He laughed.

“President Carter has his hands full with Iran.” Dubrov replied cordially. “He could not have staged his hair brained scheme at a better time, for us anyway. Now gentlemen some further updates. Currently as we speak the 357<sup>th</sup> and the 66<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Divisions are crossing the Kuskja river heading for Kandahar and Heart. Paratroopers stationed to the north are securing the Salang Tunnel through which the 360<sup>th</sup> and the 201<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Divisions will pass. They have already left Termez using pontoons to cross the Amy Darya. They have with them a full complement of tanks, APC’s, artillery and various missiles. Air cover is being supplied mainly by MIGs 21’s and 23’s operating from our own bases. Our troops are further backed by transport helicopters and our excellent MI 24 gunships. Apart from them we are not really using our best or latest hardware since this is not a war. Our objective is to secure the land against insurgents whom we know receive arms from both the Chinese and Americans through Pakistan. That is official. Now ambassador we have your communiqué to announce to the world the need for us to come to the aid of Kamal to help him and the people against this undeclared civil war.”

“What about their army?” The ambassador asked.

“Demobilised. Their tanks are being refitted and pose no threat to us.”

“Excellent.”

“It will minimise losses. Initially eighty thousand of our men will be involved although we originally had preferred to have twice that amount. But this is a political decision and not a military one. To further streamline the liberation of this country we have engaged mainly Farsi speaking troops from our southern provinces along with Uzbeks. Now as far as Balkh goes it is strictly off limits. We will only penetrate as far west as Maza-e-Sharif. We know from our intelligence services that Balkh is a major centre of rebel resistance and also a major command centre, a staging post of the utmost importance. If we strike too soon we will loose the prize. Let them think for the moment that is they who have avoided us. Then we can trace their movements, their tactics with ease.” Dubrov lit a thick dark cigarette.

“A special mission is being planned for Balkh and the nearby fortress at Boyni Qara which we know is their nerve centre. Primarily we must find out how they coordinate their attacks. To prematurely destroy them would only give them an even greater advantage in this defensive manoeuvre of ours.” Refilling their glasses Dubrov proposed a toast to Colonel Bayernou’s success.

Colonel Bayernou surveyed his specially trained KGB assault troops, dressed in Afghan uniforms. They were ready in their antiquated personnel carriers which the Afghan army still had in commission. They knew the battle engagement off by heart and he repeated once again that no prisoners were to be taken and no witnesses left alive. Even the last checkpoint manned by the 8<sup>th</sup> Afghan Division fiercely loyal to Amin was to be taken out.

“By now,” he explained in the predawn quietitude, “the units of the 85<sup>th</sup> Airborne Assault Corps will have secured the palace grounds. So we have our cover. Once inside

the building no one is to leave and anybody who does so will be shot on sight. Anybody,” he thundered, “as the Afghanis might use our uniforms to try and escape our net. Only I, colonel Dubrov and Marshall Zhukov can countermand this order. Remember everybody inside the building is to be neutralised.”

There were no questions for the KGB troops were fully aware of their mission and its objective. They started their engines, prewarmed in the chill winter air and the small convoy moved away from the airport where they had assembled. The road from there lead straight to the palace. Nothing could have been simpler for Kabul was in one aspect a very open city in parts compared to Prague or Budapest.

As they passed the monolithic four storey cement block of the American embassy Bayernou joked with the driver that the sleepy heads would soon be wide awake and thoroughly trumped again. In the still crisp morning air the last of the tourist hotels were now behind them. The street was totally deserted, the last Afghan checkpoint before the palace in sight. Two soldiers saw the approaching column, hand in the air motioning them to stop. Through his field glasses Bayernou saw they were sleepy, indifferent, bored, some smoking their morning cigarettes.

Bayernou’s vehicle continued forwards slowly. Both assault cars had their guns trained on their respective objectives, two machinegun nests on either side of the road. Suddenly Bayernou’s vehicle veered to the left while shooting up the nest with their high velocity assault rifles. The defenders had little time to return fire. The second assault vehicle with their AKMs knocked out the second nest on their right. The rapid popping of the guns ceased as thirty dead Afghanis lay sprawled over the road or had died where they had fallen. Bayernou raced through the flimsy barricade while behind him his soldiers finished off the wounded. Racing at full speed they were at the palace grounds

within a minute. The palace guards alerted by the fire fight started shooting at Bayernou's assault column. Bullets whistled past them some pinging off the metal skin of their vehicles. A couple of bazooka rounds and the gates of the main entrance hung precariously upon their reinforced hinges then fell off with a resounding clang, drunkenly to the ground.

With the surrounding perimeter secure Bayernou's troops made a frontal assault through the yawning gate. Covering fire distracted the defenders within the compound. They raced through the blown out gates and fanned out into the palatial grounds. The palace guards retreated into the main building, obviously protecting Amin. Their own fast firing AKMs turned the defenders into twitching, exploding mangled puppets spurting blood and gore as the Soviets pumped round after round into the retreating soldiers. A few well placed self propelled grenades demolished several entrances as dull thuds blew out barricaded doors.

Having secured the outside perimeter they were momentarily pinned down by fierce fire from within the building. Donning their masks his troops fired several teargas canisters into the entrance and began their direct assault. From the top floor Bayernou heard the tinkle of glass. The palace guards began to fire directly upon his troops. Some were already dead or dying. Others had to retreat behind the personnel carriers. One was hit, exploding in an orange ball of flame catching several of his troops by surprise. Screaming covered with burning fuel they ran frantically in crazy weaving flame splattered patterns until put out of their misery. Shot by their own men.

Bayernou calculated that by now he must have lost well on a quarter of his men. Several of his troops shot well aimed grenades into the blown out windows of the building followed by several more volleys of tear gas. Slowly their own concentrated fire

power drove back the defenders from the main entrance. Grey smoke billowed into the still chill air. The assault troops began to storm the main entrance. Another window was blown out by a grenade and countless bullets bounced and ricocheted off various corners and protrusions as the Soviets attempted to keep the guards from firing upon them.

Bayernou heard a loud rapport of gunfire just inside the entrance. Racing ahead, dodging the dead mangled and blood splattered bodies he found to his surprise the guards had vanished. The bodyguards knew the palace well and only the continued use of teargas flushed them from various strategic vantage points. He could see several of his men falling to the ground as the fierce fighters put up their stiff resistance.

Slowly the Soviets fired their way through the smoke filled rooms. The masks they wore created their own danger, a lack of perspective and vision while the Afghanis merely wrapped a head cloth about their face ambushing again and again the advancing KGB troops. Firing up the stairs a slow and deadly battle of exploding bodies pumped full of furious firepower, staggering, pirouetting down the stairs in their grotesque dance of death Bayernou started to have misgivings for the success of this important mission.

Although Amin and his family were certainly trapped it did not mean that he had achieved his objective. Amin's guards had retreated to the top floor. Someone said Amin had been seen at the bar. Some of his guards escaped through the blown out windows and were attacking them from the rear. More dead even though the 85<sup>th</sup> was covering them. Only a few among his troops had actually gained an entrance and still his men were being slaughtered. If the Afghanis managed to gather reinforcements he would be in deep shit. To get to the top landing was their aim and as yet no real advance had been made or any part of the building as yet secured. Grenades demolished furniture as the defenders fired at them with merciless precision, knowing death was near. He saw four more of his men



mangled into a mass of bloody pulp as his troops finally blew out the doors of the upstairs bar. They were met by four machine gunners, the Soviets dying instantly.

Bayernou suddenly realised he had no radio communications, his sparks was dead and the equipment scrap. The other was outside. He needed the 85<sup>th</sup> desperately but could not call them from any of the windows fearing his own snipers would end his life there and then. Running down the stairs, dodging the remaining guards who were still coming from behind he managed to safely reach the ground floor nearly tripping over the mushy corpses already covered with flies which had come to feast on the carrion flesh. He made his way cautiously out of the building not wishing to alarm his own troops when a swirl of bullets ripped through him. He stood there amazed at his own bleeding body but could see no palace guards on these his final moments, only his own KGB troops. He collapsed amongst the twisted bodies of the Afghans. He had been felled by his own orders.

Anyone leaving the building was to be shot on sight. He died a hero of the Soviet Union.

The Soviets were finally storming the bar. They had landed a few well placed stun grenades behind the counter from where the guards had killed several of them. The soldiers later remembered in the heat of the battle that Amin had sat to one side away from the firing, quietly sipping his drink, a stunning dark woman by his side, her eyes wide open in fear. By now she realised probably that this was not part of the contract and she still had not been paid in full. But this was no time to argue about conditions of employment.

As the last of the palace guards died in a hail of bullets the Soviets emptied their AKMs into the startled woman and an astonished Amin as his glass of whisky flew in a perfect parabola across the room, its contents leaving a beautiful sparkling trail. It was a pity about the woman, she had been stunning. Amin was dead as was his family.

A sudden burst of machinegun fire cut down several Soviets. They had thought themselves secure but several defenders had managed to get upstairs and the Soviets in a rush to get to Amin had exposed themselves. The Afghanis cut them all down but the 85<sup>th</sup> by now had made the final assault to secure the palace and shot the last of the defenders.

The fight for Afghanistan had begun, in earnest.

## **In Transit**

Reclining in constricted seats with refreshing air conditioning Martin watched the brown parched earth of central Pakistan drift by as they winged their way towards Delhi. Neither Max nor Martin aware how lucky they were to get out when they did. As the Soviets started to occupy Afghanistan this civilian flight had been one of the last out of the beleaguered country.

Max was thoroughly fed up with the whole expedition and thoroughly pissed off with Rosenberg. He drank whisky after whisky listening to his headphones. Martin asked for Max's notes. Max pointed to his small bag and Martin retrieved a large foolscap sized folder. Then delved into the cramped writing which he hoped would reveal the reason for it all. In retrospect Martin considered Rosenberg to have been too clandestine, his mission too obscure, his actions too desperate even though pretending to be the personification of rationality itself.

According to Max it had all begun in Rosenberg's tortured mind with the sudden rise of the Sumerian world. Their priests had hinted at benign gods which upon further investigation led to descendants of an even older race previously unsuspected.

The important point the later Babylonian clay tablets which had hinted at the existence of a godlike realm in which firmly entrenched was the notion of the abyss. Depicted by a demigod its foot resting upon the grinning decapitated head of a vanquished demon. A creature from the other side. A disturbing image and a symbol of certain victory over chaos, over the penultimate dark and over absolute perdition. Rosenberg writing of their awesome power and heroic deeds of conquering this overwhelming cosmic force. His attention gripped by an even greater discovery. The

slaying of the god Tiamat. In their Book of Destiny the god was slain and her allies put into eternal bondage beyond the realms of the known skies. Then the entrances of that world made narrow whilst the entrance to the world of the good gods were wide and sure and brought to mankind the Immortal Fruit. Some drug no doubt.

But Babylon fell apparently due to their presumptuousness to storm the gates of heaven with an artifice, or artefact or even the tower itself. The latter the myopic view of the Hebrews. Then came Alexander, Antipater and Parmenion who all warned that in Asia a Great Darkness lay in wait, ready to engulf the trespasser. Alexander's army crossed the Euphrates and conquered Persia. But his might was checked by a small and inconsequential chieftain who pulped his army into the ground, devastating them so thoroughly that when they faced the might of India they had no will left to fight. The location of the first defeat ancient Baktria, modern Balkh. After that Alexander retreated having been infected by something unholy. He grew insane thinking himself as the resurrected Jupiter who rained fiery bolts of destruction from the heavens upon a stricken humanity. Dying in Asia insane.

Then another great conqueror discovered Baktria. Ashoka and it was just more than coincidence that his expansion westward also ground to a halt at Baktria. But Ashoka was born into a totally different world to that of the barbaric Greeks. Ashoka had learnt and absorbed the wisdom of the learned at Taxala where he had served as viceroy. Checked at Baktria Ashoka underwent a radical and personal transformation. Unlike Alexander he did not turn his mind towards dissolute gods but instead became one of the few truly enlightened rulers the world had even known. His heir Chandragupta consolidated those gains. Still the greatest armies of the world had been struck down by something in Baktria. No wonder it attracted Rosenberg.

Martin skipped several pages where Rosenberg described the slow journey eastward from Herat as he inched his way towards a secret destination in Balkh. And it was here that Praj entered the scene. They finally arrived at some ancient deserted temple's ruins. On an ancient plateau with several entrances still remaining.

*'I remember the demonic power this place possessed. A secret so terrible that those who ventured to capture this place were doomed to become as one with their dark deeds. Yet its infamy preceded its reputation in history. For when humanity had emerged from the violence of the last Stone Age they had been conquered by an abominable race calling themselves Turanian, worshipping cruel sky gods and indulging in insane rites. They drew their evil from a necromantic tablet engraved with ciphers that etched its apoplexic destruction into their riven souls.'*

*'It is my intention to steal this tablet so that no one will ever attempt to resurrect that which must like Tiamat stay eternally silent and never invade our time again For its runes describe the creation within the soul of a psychic marasmus. I intend to destroy this blasted place.'*

*'We began to make our move with torturous infinite slowness. We crawled over pebbly ground. The moonless night was as dark as pitch. Then we stood trembling with anticipation under the gloomy shadow of this ruin which had once housed the most abominable cult this planet had ever known. And someone was trying to resurrect it. Yet how strange, how silent, how innocent it all appeared. Devoid of the blasphemous things which had devoured the innocent bloodied shrieking victims while sombre and solemn faced priests chanted their hideous prayers. This Asiatic Darkness has to be destroyed.'*

*'We passed the narrow crumbling entrance and were instantly assailed by the subterranean night below as we stumbled forwards in this forgotten adytum. My mind was aflame with an intoxicated exhilaration. The fearful warnings of the later prophets I ignored as we edged our way into the edifice. Stalking through tunnels, advancing into the dismal darkness we noticed the stifling air as if the putrescence of ages still lived beneath these ancient rocks.'*

*'Here was a lore awaiting the day of its rebirth. After many twists and turns of the inward driven tunnels we stumbled quite suddenly into a vast chamber. Infinite nothingness was around us, the air fresh and cool vented by hidden ducts. We had come to the main chamber of this morbid catafalque. Nor was the structure crudely crafted by stone age technology but a sophisticated building worked into smooth walls and supported by cyclopedian columns from whence shone in eerie unnatural light. Odd inscriptions ever so faintly moving and glowing in front of us. Their contortions disturbed the mind creating sinister connotations and only through our foreknowledge were we able to contain the ever inquisitive imagination wishing to probe this evil.'*

*'It took some time for us to find the narrow entrance struck into solid stone of this mausoleum. We descended the time worn stairs. Foul air rushed up to meet us as we spiralled down into the open gulf. We entered an age of forlornness having at last arrived at the cursed place. In the dim light we saw a raised dais outlining the terrible artefact which we had come to take. Whispering to Praj telling him not to look at the thing directly we were engaged with the tablet, amazed at the craftsmanship of the object. Hours passed as we worked to lift this perfectly fitting slab from its resting position only to be nearly suffocated by a horrible stench as we successfully removed it from the dais.'*

*'The ancient putrid air stank of some timeless lingering death. My head reeled with insane grotesqueries that nullified the horror of any nightmare I ever dreamt. Staggering backwards we were both able, after a strenuous and exertive effort to will ourselves, to clamber upwards back into the huge hall where the stench seemed to follow us.'*

*'Once clear of the purulent chamber Praj pulled out his torch and placing a red filter over the glass flashed three quick bursts into the night. I heard the start of the expected motor roaring to life. The helicopter had no trouble landing near the ruins and within a few hours we were safely in Kabul. We then made our plans to go to Kathmandu for Praj knew a monk there whose discretion was assured.'*

*'It soon became clear that this lifting of the tablet had aroused unwanted attention. It became imperative that this mission gained the semblance of credibility. I knew of an obscure researcher in Sydney who would give us the cloak we needed to continue the real mission: to discover who in Balkh was going to miss this precious and heinous relic. Once identified it became important that the countess would give us the logistics needed to destroy whoever craved the artefact and the temple once and for all.'*

Martin was flabbergasted. This whole thing had been a cover, and they had been the bunnies.

"Max." Martin said eagerly shaking his friend gently in his seat. But Max was out of it.

**Vahnsin**

Zohex soddenly inebriated was reclining amongst his sumptuous furnishings, surrounded by his warrior chieftains. The din of the revelry, the belching, the



consumption of dainty foods laid upon silver platters on carved tables gave the chamber an air of debauched permanence.

No longer aware of the approaching orb outside. Seen instead by all as a sign that their plan to wipe out their enemies had heaven's favour. The sky gods on side. What Zohex failed to comprehend was that having gained consciousness on distant fallen destroyed Tellurium he barely glimpsed his true origin except for one detail. He felt drawn towards the night sky, the stars somehow intractably interwoven with his true destiny. Aiming at mastering the cosmos. As that thought gestated he also thought first to master this world in preparation for his next move. Since he assumed time, fate and destiny to be on his side. He indulged himself and those who paid obsecence to him. For now, in revelry nothing could penetrate his obliterated mind through the copious consumption of aromatic scented drugged wines. Ah it was good not just feel like a god but be one. Zohex supreme, at the pinnacle of success and nothing and no one could stop him.

Rich tapestries hung in front of exquisitely wrought brass vessels, their smouldering incense of exotic fumes mingling with the aroma of rich foods. Toxic wines flowed into eager gullets like gushing mountain springs. It was as if these ancient ancestors of Thule had come from their abodes and now joined in the war whilst feasting on the consummation of coming victories.

There were the priests, sheriffs and dignitaries dressed in their rich garb of embroidered cloth sometimes vetoing the more outrageous and impractical ideas coming from Zohex's barbarian chiefs who had more bloodlust in them than common sense. Yet all like Zohex had that one objective: the annihilation of the Dravidians, then onto fallen Moerdrum. This continent would be theirs. Zohex listened with a glazed stupor to the

music wafting amongst the din, played by hidden musicians. He watched scantily clad girls who danced lithesomly amongst his guests.

He turned his attention with some difficulty to the reason for their gathering. Court etiquette required at a council of war for all views to be aired and discussed so that the best plans could be chosen at Zohex's discretion. He pontificated, sure of himself embellished in a mystic aura by his strange amulets and potent jewellery plunging over other minds like a famished vulture. To him his enemies had already been sent to oblivion. Whether any of the chieftains listened to his advice was a moot point as they quaffed the rich wines whilst pawing the voluptuous courtesans. The nectar flowed into their intoxicated brains. Their dilated eyes saw only the colourful beauty of these enticing nimble girls who captured on bloody raids danced rather lethargically to the Turanian's eerie melodies.

Zohex's mind now less sharp, less instinctively right and befuddled by the sparkling ambrosia, having stuffed himself with exotic and rich foods which drained the blood from his brain which in turn made him incognisant to the foreboding omens around him.

Above the unnaturally glowing sky were conceived by all as a sign of benign favour and equally aided by the priests and the equinaminous Merduk. Thick tempestuous clouds collected menacingly over the fortress in an oppressive air of solemn rejection. But the arresting brilliance of the festivities blighted their occult vision, turning the noisy hall into a chaotic chimera. A northerly wind had sprung up unleashing a torrential downpour. The light of the orb dimmed only slightly under the heaving heavenly onslaught.

“The plans then have been decided upon.” Zohex blurted out in his raspy croaking voice. He belched, rose shakily on his drunken legs only to sink back into his couch cheered by the clamour of his consorts.

“But we cannot use force alone. We must use the cosmic powers invested in me and mediated with Merduk’s aid.” He paused, dimly aware of his cosmic destiny. “Where is that bastard. Someone fetch him, guards!” He roared and with a throaty explosion of mucous phlegm which flew over the table shouted: “Bring me Merduk!” Screaming in livid tones having cleared his throat.

The king’s guards appeared and explained testily the reason for Merduk’s absence. The presence of a woman.

“No matter.” Zohex said somewhat mollified. “I will fetch him myself.” He took a generous swig of the scented and drugged wine, the ambrosia flowing more over him than into him. Losing his balance trying to stand he collapsed with sodden and bleary eyes back into his cushioned lounge for a second time.

“We will draw upon Ahriman and through him and his might residing only here, will we bring about the destruction of our enemies. The renegades will be enslaved and we will rid ourselves of this noxious scum. I have also received intelligence from Ahriman that the god has wasted Moerdrum. Shaviscara is irrelevant.” There rose a round of jubilant cheery from his drunken chiefs.

“We will transmute the powers to our will. We will dominate this continent and throw our might against those weaklings at Elburz. We will rule the world!” And after that the heavens by his own might. They raised their golden goblets even though all were not capable of standing to quaff down the inebriating wine.

The orb continued to incrementally expand in the sky. Obliterating a quarter of it. Emanating from its alien power an unknown and encumbering burden of which the Turanians were oblivious. Contorted clouds twisted by the invisible exudence of the alien sun immersed Vahnsin in a numbing paralysis, descending in silence. The birds were still, rodents scampered away and vanished, the wind dropped then ceased. Nature expectant. Within the walls of the citadel the celebrations continued, the roar and the frivolities blinded the Turanians to this foreign turbulence. Exanimate shadows began to flow into the ancient structure.

### **Boyni Qara, Afghanistan**

News of the Soviet incursion spread rapidly amongst the hill tribes. The preparations made months ago by Shuja, Tuqlaq, Marabi and Serinda currently recovering with Kufi were in place. Hanballi in contact with Tuqlaq continued to notify him of the Soviet advance. They were still flying in their troops and assorted military

equipment. Rissala had been informed of the massive Soviet troop movements along the various points of their northern borders. Many of the Soviets were in Afghan uniforms.

Tuqlaq acted. Within hours the fort was evacuated. The women and children along with their livestock had withdrawn into the valleys of the hills. The men vanished amongst the massive mountain ranges around Turkestan, some heading as far south as Koh-e-Hesar. The remainder involved in the defence of Boyni Qara established themselves with a second base at Elburz where Tuqlaq set up his headquarters. Rassid kept watch in their north eastern perimeter.

Many sightings of the invaders had been erroneous. Some said the Soviets were gathering in the cities, securing the highways and turning Kabul into a fortress. Others insisted this was merely a pre-emptive strike against the rebels. If that was the case then the actions around Balkh bore this out for Tuqlaq. The Soviets were now stationed at Maza-e-Sharif and a detachment of Afghan troops had entered Balkh. That was the extent of the occupation so far. Most of the invading troops were moving south towards the Salang Tunnel and thence the capital. The eastern provinces had most of the airbases in the Pathan areas who reached across the border into the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. The border for them was nothing. Unfortunately eastern Afghanistan was totally under military occupation of a foreign power.

Within a day of having been informed of the Soviet attack most of the defenders at Boyni Qara had dug themselves deep into the old fortress battening themselves down in the myriad tunnels below. The hill was riddled with underground passageways, a defence which had defeated many a conquering hero. Often the mud brick fort above was levelled to the ground for their real headquarters had always been underground.

Shuja had spent the last week at the old ruined citadel preparing another form of defence which awaited the unwelcome intruder. That shielding force had weakened and sapped the might of the Greeks over two thousand years ago and had turned Ashoka back towards India.

Elburz had become a refuge for most of the surrounding villages as the Soviet penetration continued. Shuja remained confident. Even though this war belonged to the twentieth century he knew it mattered little on the long run. The psychology of the human mind had not changed since the time they had woken the power of the citadel from its sleep guided by Shuja.

The first wave of Soviet helicopter gunships swooped in low over the fortress descending with a blustery northern wind. Their rockets lit up their squat undersides. Flashes of bright streaks sought the hilltop target. A direct hit brought down the gun tower. The few defenders above had taken some pot shots at the helicopters then rapidly retreated underground.

Below with many vantage points along the various sides of the hill Tuqlaq's fighters got ready their precious Red Eye and Stinger missiles. Still the gunships lunged at the burning fortress unleashing their awesome firepower, racking the ground with explosive bullets. They meant to finish the job. The amount of what they carried was prodigious. They continued their sorties aiming lower, spewing forth thin missiles. Flashing explosions rocketed the masonry, bricks, wooden supports bursting into fragments followed by lashing tongues of violent flames. The fort was a blaze of misshapen ruins, the burning blown out buildings exasperated monuments of war. The gunships decided to return to base.

Training their heat seeking missiles on the smudgy dark exhaust fumes of the leading chopper half a dozen small orange streaks suddenly shot forth from beneath the fort. The first three rockets hit their targets, their deadly swiftness now a parody of exploding metal as thick rich orange clouds burst the scattering twisted helicopters in all directions. Two rockets fell short but others found their mark in a shrieking tearing explosion turning the gunships into instant scrap metal. The machines tried to outmanoeuvre the counter attack but they were still too close to the fort and two more went down in flames, exploding on impact, the mushroom fire balls lighting the sky.

The air was full of whistling colours, a kaleidoscope of streaming streaks of exploding ammunition. The remaining squadron tried evasive action, lurching desperately as more missiles found their hapless victims. Three more brilliant flashes filled the wintry sky, two of them detonating instantly the last twisting in a fireball towards the ground. The gunship blew up in a dull rich rumble as burning men were flung from the wreckage, their screams drowned by the igniting ammunition. Only two gunships survived climbing higher trying to pinpoint the exact origin of the ambush. All they saw was the burning fort below.

Shuja and Yehensho sat in silence under the old citadel. They heard the distant rumble of war. The attack had begun. Shuja told Yehensho of the strange Indian woman who had been determined to force an entry through the gateway of the abyss. Yehensho was surprised Shuja allowed her ingress.

“She is nothing.” He said dismissively. “Soon the seal will be in place and she will be trapped as will those who were foolish enough to enter.”

Yehensho bowed in respect.

“Let’s do it then.”

### **Vahnsin**

Deep within the citadel of Elburz, Kathan called the elders together. They were assembled in the small, as opposed to the great ceremonial hall. This secret chamber was reserved for the most dire of occasions, all out war. And events demanded their attention. Forewarned through the sentient intelligence of their combined minds fused into the mandala they all carried deeply embedded within them they were now gathered to accomplish the destruction of Zohex and the Turanian Race. The evil emanating from Vahnsin was reaching extravagant proportions.



The elders were seated around an unremarkable round table. Guided by Kathan they superimposed their inner mandala upon it. Slowly an empty hollow bottomless depression appeared linking the infinite darkness within the Earth to the cosmic matrix of the mandala. The selfsame power Zohex was twisting into a dangerous miasma, threatening the future of the human race.

Zohex's criminal mind was literally destroying all. They knew this insane king had called forth something alien from beyond the known universe due no doubt to Merduk. He it seemed was revealing himself as the nightmare expression of Zohex's outlandish venom. Times were desperate. Zohex was trying to usurp with impunity the natural laws by resurrecting around himself this mantle of a strange sun threatening to descend upon them. Its sickening light and foul exudence of noxious vapours besmirched and corrupted the minds of the rest of the people. Whole populations now cowered in front of a wrath unknown.

One of the elders linked to Vargen reported that Maya, Vargen and Devasi, along with the benevolent stranger Bahnum Randa were now in place. Forming a powerful quaternity they would pin down, enclose and disintegrate the suppurating plague oozing from the bowels of Vahnsin. With Moerdrum of no consequence the elders agreed the subversion of Zohex's stronghold would follow as naturally as the seasons.

"There are some who still do not hesitate to offer resistance." One of the elders thought.

"Yes. We have reports from Dravidium. The black raiders levelled yet again a peaceful settlement, enslaving its inhabitants. It is obvious not all of the dark emissaries fear us." Thought another.

"Inspired by Zohex and his archimage Merduk." Replied a third.

“It matters little. The coming catastrophe will insure our victory and their demise.” Another continued feeling secure in their combined presence. “Our course of action regarding their annihilation will be aided by the latent power residing within the watchtowers. It will be adequate. The Turanians will crumble into the wasted flotsam they are.”

“The towers have been activated and but need our signal to commence their work.”

“We are ready for them.” Kathan communicated. “Let us concentrate upon the fragile shell that is Zohex’s delirious edifice.”

They sat in an embracing silence combining their ancient talents, opening the recumbent powers hidden within the watchtowers, for that was the outer manifestation of Elburz’s own mandala. Their sovereign cogent powers ready to be unleashed, devastating the Turanian hordes. They formed the matrix, an unassailable front encompassing their chosen target. Pools of lambent energy circumbulated Elburz, the citadel and towers aglow with the excess power spreading towards Vahnsin.

The spatial opening forced by the elders allowed the dark resonance to swallow the table completely transforming it into an even larger dark pool of cosmic potency. The dark shaft shot skywards, not though to annihilate the embracing light of the alien sun. They knew the strange orb was more of an envelope than anything else. Was Zohex trying to strangle the life force on this planet so he could become its supreme ruler? One of the elders wondered. But there was no time to analyse its still unknown properties. Obviously it was not of a substance resembling anything coming from this realm.

But something did dawn upon the collective minds of the gathering. Only Merduk had the strength, the power and the knowledge to summon this energy field to be placed

so close, for reasons only he knew and until now of which they had not been aware. Was Zohex then a diversion? Still they were committed. To change the direction of the assault could be costly. By rediverting their energies at this crucial juncture to this seeming cosmic invasion could give Zohex the breathing space he needed to be victorious. No, their collective mind agreed. Zohex first.

As the darkness from Elburz expanded, guided by their agents towards their enemy they felt together the rising trembling force as it built up into a veritable attack of unsurpassable defiance. The directional alignment of the mandala focussed and complete, to utterly ruin Vahnsin.

Immersed in votive meditations, purified and rekindled by surging oblations Devasi became the transmutation of the sacred vessel containing the cosmic fires of the Devas. Soaring upon the holy flames Devasi reached areas of interstellar energies known only to the lore of her creed. She was ready. The enemy at Moerdrum were now mere charred remnants of their discarded past, the empire a fragmented ruin destroyed by resurrected semblances, thwarting the degenerate remainders.

Maya had made her aware of Merduk's insane plan to envelope the earth with his alien mantle: a powerful matrix that would transmute life into their otherworldly existence. And at his temple in Vahnsin's citadel he left a legacy of his own: a remnant psychic intrusion enclosed within that dread fane, chained unto runes embedded within the tablet. If someone courageous enough dared to fathom that knowledge then that person would master its dusk shrouded cognisance. Then again Maya reasoned it was possible for Merduk to merely have laid a trap whereby the terrific runes ensnared the

fool delving into its forbidden empyrium and thus force the captured soul into the realm of Ahriman's eternal oblivion.

Devasi's emotions swelled like oceanic tides over her. Aided by Vargen's mantras she began to control her inner drive aiming to annihilate Zohex's rampart obscenities infesting the land. Vargen now turned his attention totally towards Devasi, for he knew Bahnum Randa was more than just an itinerant traveller. Vargen was aware of the mandala embedded within this shaman whom the elders of Elburz had taken into their trust.

"Soon the secret fires within you and the connection to the sacred realm from whence you came will obliterate the enemy through genocidal forces building within you. Do not allow your hatred of Vahnsin to cloud your mind or your celestial call to battle. Hatred itself is a form of creation, a delusion peculiar to the Turanians who need such anger to call down their gods. But Zohex is finished, for the disaster which will overwhelm him is already in progress. The cycles are in motion."

"Their invocations to Ahriman is nothing but an externalised projection of their distorted minds. Zohex of course believes in this actuality and thinks it will grant him his eternal continuation as the penultimate creation of his race. Instead, as we know he has allowed his occult energies to flow out of his being and into the esurient wastes of his nighted delusions. And this he unites by weaving into its foul matrix both the mental and physical profligacies from which he cannot escape. In one way he has made it easy for us to tilt the balance in our favour, for he depletes his own vitality. In contrast we have pooled our energies into the cosmic reservoir of the realm of the Devas and these fires will cleanse Vahnsin of the insanity that rules there."

The glaring yellow sky turned shadow into light making the sun look feeble. The countryside reflected the resonance of the alien exudence. Strange waif like spectres wafted amongst the forest, heading slowly to the doomed citadel as if scenting victory.

Uttering sibilant enchantments, calling upon munificent gods released from the mist cloaked refuge of Elburz Vargen proceeded to throw exotic herbs and rare plants into the hearth of the sacred fire. A narcotic smoke rose opening to the devotees the pulsing radiance of vengeful heavens. Devasi remembered the eldritch wisdom of their hoary mythology. She began to feel the distinct synthesis which would bear the apocalyptic revelations of their future. Here was creation through annihilation. She saw young stars combining into a mammoth storm ridden cosmic destruction, angry skies flashing chagrin lights from that distant galaxy espewing their eradicating firestorms.

Two of Zohex's trusted chieftains remained in the bright gleaming banquet hall. Outside an eerie lambency clung to the fortress percolating through the walls and into the chamber. As far as the horizon the glaring brightness seemed to force nature herself into recumbent hibernation. The musicians exhausted by the invisible contagion played indifferently to the diminished assemblage still at court. With the alien light came an invading cold atmosphere which not only drained the citadel of its protective spells but also drained everybody of their own vitality. The occult power of the Turanian Race was slowly being absorbed by the yellow sky above. The young girls danced lethargically to the discordant beat of the Turanian tribal war drums.

Kolic a bulky corpulent warrior clothed in the tough leather gear of the mounted raiders watched Zohex with bleary eyes, waiting for the king to acknowledge his presence.

His friend Finsterniss, a scrawny sinewy figure serving under him his face riddled with battle scars sat a little behind his peer. Neither was inclined to wear the grotesque facial jewellery favoured by the other soldiers when at court. Nor had they stormed out when Zohex finally gave the orders for the final victory to be consummated, noting rather to themselves the threatening omens engulfing Vahnsin for some time now. Enigmatic in their presence they brooded ill for the coming venture.

But Zohex was oblivious to what was happening in his realm. Rather he had become delirious with joy at the prospect of this, the final war against the remaining renegades. Believing through the divine aid of Ahriman that he would harvest at last the rest of Asia and fuse it to the might of Vahnsin. Caught in his megalomaniacal exuberance Zohex was not aware through his fading preternatural perception the elements rising with colossal devastation against his rapidly disintegrating armies.

“Kolic,” Zohex sneered, the cruel mouth a twisted smile, “you have not ridden out with the other commanders.”

“Lord Zohex.” Kolic bowed seated, “I need to speak with Merduk.”

“Yes,” Zohex replied distractedly, “we have summoned him.” Putting down a golden goblet he ordered a court servant to summon the archimage once again. The captain of the palace guard, his long black hair flowing behind him returned to the banquet chamber and informed Zohex that Merduck was ignoring the royal command.

“What?” Came the dangerous response.

“Lord,” the captain answered slightly unsure of himself, “he is in communion.”

“Then fetch Salum, his aide.” Zohex shouted. The captain saluted and left the banquet hall to carry out the king’s wishes.

“Now Kolic, a drink. You too Finsterniss. You will like this vintage. It will wipe the glum look off your face.” Watching them like a hawk Zohex peered into their eyes and did not like what he saw. The disease he felt in them, as he had seen in others appeared only to be transitory, some pathetic effort of Elburz to weaken them no doubt. The drugged wine dispelled his suspicions, for it was too late for his enemies to desist from their plans to assault Vahnsin. Nevertheless the feeling of apprehension did not leave him entirely. Something was amiss. This disturbed him, pricking his sense of well being.

“What need you from Merduk, a blessing?” Zohex laughed draining his wine goblet and refilling it from a silver decanter. Kolic and Finsterniss merely pretended to sip their heady libation. As Zohex poured the dark red liquid splashing liberally into the cup and over the table Zohex relaxed staring good naturedly at his two vassals.

“Well?”

“The heretics my lord have received supernatural aid from Elburz.” Kolic replied.

“Elburz? Those old women?” Zohex laughed dismissively. “They are nothing.”

“They were instrumental in Moerdrum’s destruction.”

“Nonsense.” Zohex was growing impatient. “Dauthus’s mind had been addled and befuddled by Lethena and her wizard father. Their unpremeditated collapse and their unpremeditated vengeance combined with his presumptive use of forbidden magic backfired taking him and Moerdrum to its doom, that’s all.”

“It was the elders through Devasi who jeopardised Dauthus’s plans. They guided him to his destruction through the use of their well placed agents from Elburz.” Kolic insistent.

“And you suspect the enemy is within.”

“Merduk would know I am sure. There have been rumours to that effect my lord.”

Zohex’s eyes were turning furious. He banged the wine goblet onto the table spilling its contents.

“Mudhan, the woman with Vargen whom you sacrificed was Elburz’s first bait. With her death the first dose of their poison was released into our midst. Then in Moerdrum secret vaults were opened by the enemy. The venom from them flooded into the city which collapsed rapidly after that. It was an onslaught without the need for battle. There was no resistance. Elburz’s victory supreme.”

“And you think I would be so foolish as to allow these snivelling effeminate whores to take Vahnsin through such cowardly subterfuge? Kolic I am dismayed at your lack of faith. This is folly you speak of. These are lies bordering on treason.” Zohex bellowed in rage affronted at the insult that his might be of lesser magic.

Salum entered. With nervous apprehension he stumbled ungainly towards the king. He bore disturbing news. Zohex knew it at once, knew what troubled Salum and demanded with harsh severity what intelligence he brought from the temple.

“Merduk has vanished.” Salum said quietly. Not what Zohex had thought. “There was a woman...”

Zohex’s ferocious growl was replaced by a look of incredulity. Raucous laughter exploded catching them by surprise.

“A woman, Merduk? Is he human after all then?”

“No my lord.” Salum answered shocked at such a suggestion.

Zohex’s expression froze. His glacial eyes held the priest. Something in his memory tried to break through his muddled consciousness. Merduk had appeared in



Tellurium just like himself. But that had been a while. His appearance uncanny the way they had fallen into each other's orbit. Was Merduk to be trusted?

"What then. Has he truly flown?"

"I do not know. The most sacred of chambers was filled with a glimmering translucence, the woman a shadow of her former self. Merduk was with her. Then there was emptiness. Vanished from the temple."

"Gone?" Zohex tried to manage his rising perturbations then calmed himself with some difficulty. "Never mind, you can answer for him instead. Be seated."

The young priest did as he was bidden, facing Zohex nervously.

"My lord?"

Zohex nodded to Kolic who put down the goblet letting his eyes rest upon the tremulous aide asking him if Elburz was behind the demise of Moerdrum.

Salum's mind froze. It was the second shock he experienced today. He glanced from Kolic to Zohex, adjusting his robe. Seeking an answer he stared out of the window into the ever brightening sky. The unholy light was beginning to increase its unnatural radiance. From the fortress of Elburz he sensed the rising darkness percolating towards them through the valleys and the open plains. And with that darkness came omens of retribution. All he knew was the prediction of the night before, the presentiment he did not wish to acknowledge. Now Zohex gave him no choice.

"No." He answered thoughtfully surprised at the evasion. The fact was he did not know for sure what Elburz was doing. Moerdrum's demise had surprised him especially as Elburz was cloaked in silence at the time of the calamity. He said as much but Zohex was not entirely satisfied.

“It is a ruse of their staying mute with their treasonable act.” Kolic ventured turning to Zohex who had wine dribbling down his chin. “We must annihilate Elburz first and foremost.”

“You doubt our power?” Zohex was besides himself. “Well you all shall learn. Go to your stations now! I will deal with Elburz myself. Leave! I will conquer what you fail to grasp. Fools, seeking women’s answers. Out of my sight, all of you.”

Kolic was on the point of saying something but thought better of it. He left followed unsteadily by Finsterniss.

“You Salum, stay.” The priest was hesitant about wishing to remain. “Is there any truth in what Kolic said?”

“I think not my lord.” He answered diplomatically.

“Come, do not dally with me. I want the truth.” Zohex threatened.

“Sire, something is invading the realm. What it is I cannot exactly say. I do not know. Merduk does. But he would not share such information with me. A contagion does seem to cloak the land. Hour by hour I shudder inadvertently at the light about to engulf us. Last night with that alien sun hovering so menacingly close to us I incanted terrible prayers to assuage what is rising against the kingdom. A vision was granted by the deities. Vahnsin dissolved with new perspectives and dimensions all around. The empire dead., levelled into premature extinction. I continued with my incantations. New powers actually assailed me. A monstrous litany usurped what had been holy and right.”

“But what did you see?”

“At first a primeval desolation. Mountains towered around me. Alien constellations circled above. Everywhere was the decay of ages. All was lost.”

“It is your mind that is lost. Out of my sight and bring me Merduk.” Zohex yelled. Salum scampered away relieved just to be alive.

“Primitives.” Zohex mumbled to himself pouring another drink. The drugged wine soothed him. His servants and palace guards had more guts than some of the warriors he noted dispassionately. They at least stood their ground. He saw his concubine shivering with fright. If anything he ruminated all Elburz actually achieved was to frighten his women. The elders were without substance. He laughed. It would be easy to penetrate their stronghold and annihilate them. But to achieve that he needed the aid of Merduk.

Zohex indifferent to the convoluted difficulties conjured up by Elburz, ignoring the fears of Salum reclined thankfully amongst the emblazoned furniture and rich opulence of the dining chamber. Now that his guests were gone he felt the silence about him even though the musicians continued their orchestrations. He stared brazenly out of the window. The strange light was fading as the darkness poured forth from below, giving the light a dark lustre, diminishing the glare of the alien cloak. There was a familiarity to its spread, as if it was not just an orb which, so close, had become the whole sky. As if it were a membrane of something else, one he could penetrate and be done with Vahnsin. Intoxicated as he was this he made sure he would remember. He had escaped, albeit with Merduk from Tellurium and if need be escape here as well. The universe was larger than just this reality. He paused. Where had that thought come from? Alternative realities. Was this light veil a way both out and in to a more commendable reality? In his dream he walked the earth in a dry parched land where another was doing his bidding. And then there were the ancient ruins in a mountainous land not unlike here. Was he really present on all of them? Now was not the time to speculate. His quest to conquer

the continent would be realised. The darkness that had to be Ahriman who was indeed with him. The singular god would save him. His potency unbreachable.

Outside changes were in progress. Over the citadel a storm was brewing into a rising tempest, the livid clouds laden with impending impetuous death. Foul phantoms entered the palatial grounds, their deadly venom impregnating the stifling air. Servants shrunk away in dread panic followed uneasily by the crouching musicians. Drunken palace guards deserted their posts. The last of his warriors were on their way to deal with Elburz, ready to vanquish the enemy. Yet the powers of Elburz had been unleashed. The sky an obliteration of hazy fading light and behind it lay the darkness. But behind that another part of his brain told him was the way out of here. Completely. Someone screamed stricken by something they could not cope with.

Defiantly Zohex remained firm resolving to hold the impetuous invasion at bay. His young and nimble concubine was shaking with dread, whimpering, then scampering away into the passageway away from the doom threatening the citadel. The furniture vibrated tremulously in wake of the invading wrath. Assailed by the avenging dread of the elders the earth vomited forth decayed corpses wrenched from their opened tombs and resurrected psychic irruptions accompanied by the ghastly stench of their gravenous decay. Arabesque monstrosities, demented prisoners of the temple lolled their dead eyes amongst the unleashed horrors.

The fortress shook. Zohex remained immobile. The last of the slaves disappeared, the glare of the banquet hall and the glitter of the festivities a tarnished insult. Spectres with misbegotten limbs stalked in delirious mockery behind velvet curtains. Ghostly flames cast a flickering glow around the candelabrum, their lights determining his circumscribed life. A multitude of forgotten mutations were unleashed crawling over the

palace driven from secret chasms, torn down from the insane sky, resurrected from the musty chamber of Merduk's retreat.

His limbs buckled under him as fear paralysed all thought of action. Zohex tried desperately to grasp the hazy reality torn to shreds around him. Elburz's spells drained him of his remaining strength. He sank to the floor amongst a heap of broken platters and spilled food. Cups of precious wine flowed like blood from silver decanters to pay a last obescience to Ahriman. His clotted brain was as immobile as his limp body.

He called upon the powers which had aided for, he could not remember how long, generations his unsurpassable conquests. But that seemed wrong, out of perspective. There was nothing prior Tellurium. Yet that too meant nothing. It all meant nothing. As if evolution had taken a wrong turn. And now all was to be aborted. Silence answered his scornful demands. Ahriman remained mute to his summons. Was the god a chimera of his mind? No there was a link with Ahriman the connection, not the end itself. Guided by more potent beings in distant space. The Deep Visionaries. But they too were merely conducive to higher power to which he belonged! So was he abandoned here? The experiment a failure? Not yet.

The nighted refuse of life penetrated his frozen soul. Amongst the churning moving clouds a reprobate fire glimmered behind the sinister impression predicting the inevitable frightening consequences of his unrestrained bezerk psychotic state. He discerned violent gurgling sound, the last damned suffocating exclamations of his warriors dying at the hands of unknown cogencies. Desperately Zohex tried to move from amongst the spoils of the table as he lay mingled with the meats and fruits in his own rank defilement.

He heard taunting music, subdued laughter, filled with a disgusting nausea. Zohex thought himself in the realm of Ahriman's vaulted heaven revelling in the land of the vigilant, the ancient defenders of sunken Thule. It was another reality no more. Instead dark vapours poured through the open windows paralysing his will to act, to respond. Yet his senses were remarkably clear. Impotently he watched as the thick oily darkness rose around him. He was beginning to hope this rising oblivion was Ahriman answering his call and desperate prayer. His terror left him momentarily as the ethereal substance wrapped itself around him. Turning into a sweaty oozing fear. His dread rose to new heights infiltrating his body with an awful finality mingling his ancient blood with glee. He lay there, immobile, his eyes wide open, his mind frightfully aware of the confiding pandemonium encircled him.

Within the palace a treacherous morbid silence pulsed through the building. He felt sick, a sickness which gripped and clutched his very bones condemning his body while allowing his impaled mind to live. Inquisitorial sounds bombarded his senses. From beyond the windows, threats offering a mocking foretaste of his immanent dissolution. Still he lived. He was connected to something vast which was way out there. This nightmare was perhaps exactly that. A reality gone wrong. He saw shapes writhe with deadly locution uttering syllables which sent severe shudders through his emaciated body. Delirious with panic he felt the soft touch of something dreadful. He yearned for release and liberation, it was so close, from this wasting assault. Life clung to his decaying torso. He saw candles in the distance, their lights like demons of mercy, servants of Ahriman come to rescue his soul. But those slender white incubi were the projections of his frantic desperation. His body was seared by pain as the once

condemned discarded souls and murdered victims of his insatiable evil returned to claim the object of their undisguised hate.

An encumbering burden set upon him. The paralysis crawled up his spine. Mocking aberrations cruelly indulged themselves with his predestined fate. Surely not. Salvation if not escape still at hand. Damp glistening shadows slid down shiny walls, the fevered stains leaking from incorporeal semblances limping amongst the folds of the glowing curtains. They apprehended him like festering sores covering his riveted body with their pussy slime. Strange eyes hovered just beyond his consciousness watching maliciously his demise in the clammy pale room.

He looked towards the amethystine radiance on his charms now turned to gaudy deriding vacuities. Ancient resuscitations assailed him filling his ears with indescribable roars of tempestuous distortions, the whims of his ceremented illusions. Trapped in convoluted patters of his own insanity, the dark decay boiled into a vortex of profound strength. The bestial maelstrom gripped him in cadaveresque cramps reuniting to him his own oblique confusion. He had to think clearly and turned his face to the light. Then amongst the putrid viscera he saw instead the melting deformities which held fast his body now a bleeding marasmus.

With no pain. Mental disassociation. In the light sky he saw that it was not just that but an ingress. Coming to him. Energy rippling along its surface. Zohex concentrated upon it, recalling the jump gate and something else. A pattern he could not recall. But there just the same. A mandala. What his determined enemies at Elburz were using to allow this diabolical pandemonium to exist in this space, in this reality. Whatever the light membrane was it had come for him. But it needed a key, a code, a combination to enter. It was a connection from his own future! He knew this area of reality had been

undone. But that did not mean he was. Furiously he concentrated on Elburz's mandala which duplicated then absorbed its geometric spread, condensing into singularity. One small black dot amongst all this light. Then it reappeared as the jump gate which had allowed him to escape from Tellurium. Without Merduk. He was free. The dark square materialise first in his head driving out the demons. No not quite, absorbing them.

Neutralised. For the moment. With utmost concentration he willed himself to accept the veil of light to embrace him. And came through into a huge lilac orb in that distant galaxy which was his home. The Primaian's, his home planet had been ready to sacrifice him for their own dark designs. And so he had crafted this orb, manipulating Regum's technological knowledge to craft his own WebSpace, in the future. Safely cocooned from the disaster on Earth all those millennia ago. What had occurred at Vahnsin was but one possibility, one that was being aborted. By Elburz alone? Well he now had plenty of time to find out who his real antagonists were. And discovered to his delight that he existed in other realities. Vahnsin merely one from an almost infinite array of possibilities. The body he left behind a husk.

To the invasive forces Zohex, the last ruler of the Turanians, lord of Vahnsin became a stinking outline now that his persona was no more. A putrescent pool, a steaming rotting mass of globulated meat turning into a deliquescent pool of corruption dribbling about the floor.

The white sheet of light collapsed unto itself, receded and was gone.

The searing yellow glare was starting to wane. Washed out shadows began to reappear as the feeble sun struggled to shine through. The fortress of Vahnsin was loosing its sickly tinted adumbrations as storm clouds gathered around the zigurath.



For the renegades the war was one of painful attrition. The bestial legions of Zohex were sweeping all before them, virtually herding the rebels towards Vahnsin. They had ridden from the fearful fort, moving directly south circumnavigating Elburz. Having assembled on the Dravidian Plains they then scorched the earth of the peaceful villages, the renegades thwarted in taking Vahnsin and tear it down.

The rear guard, the reserves of the renegades were massacred to the last man, woman and child. The Turanians were after total domination. But the renegades had their own plan. As they marched north the columns grew. Many were unarmed but with what they could scavenge from their simple homes. Axes, spears, hunting bows, flint knives, small mobile catapults. The wealthier had swords, some basic body armour, long bows, battle axes, mounted in sturdy steeds all moving towards Vahnsin, sensing victory. Yet they were not enough to be an effective cavalry something the Turanians knew all too well. But with every village, every hamlet not burnt which they passed the people joined them and their ranks swelled to many thousands.

Bahnum woke with a start. His dream that of a surging ocean washing over the earth. Then awake under the bright lit sky blotting out all else. The fire in the sacred hearth was out. Both Vargen and Maya in deep trance. So it was more symbolic or an initiating element. It was hard to tell if it was day or night but the intense luminosity was beginning to change. Less intense. He rose quietly not wanting to disturb the two of them. Devasi herself was meditating sitting in the classic lotus position. He felt elated, light as a feather but filled with substance. Indefinable.

Then came the connection. The distant mountains to the west closer. Shuddering at the sight of the hated citadel under the glaring light. Vahnsin emptier both in substance

and content even if visually still abhorrent. Filled with restless energy distracting him. Memories of the hidden rinpoche almost of no consequence. He scanned the morbid glowing sky trying to breach Vahnsin's murderous spells. Thunder clouds were enveloping the zigurath, lightning illuminating in stark images its heinous presence. An aura surrounded the buildings, the temple, the palace grounds, the rising fortress, the dominating citadel. But the light was not being absorbed, it was radiating outwards. For a moment a flicker, shimmering, the aura being extruded, then the alien light began to curve into itself, drawing within it that from without, the wavering image held, then it became a bright point such as that of Venus in the morning. Astounded Bahnum watched as the point of light streaked outwards into the sky in one single line towards...what? Somewhere deep in space.

He felt relieved. Almost levitating. The heaviness of ages dissolved. The intense burden so imperceptibly weighing upon him dissipated. But it was not over yet. What had occurred over Vahnsin happened too fast to allow for speculation. Either something had been deposited or retrieved.

Reality assumed its normal mantle. Bahnum felt a tremendous power approaching, that of the renegades. Up on their promontory Bahnum was buoyed that in the distance towards the east a dust plume rose gently upwards casting a hazy pall over the advancing army. He felt the surging energy like a tidal wave without respite. Almost tasting in his head their determination to end it once and for all time.

“Mudhan's spirit.”

Bahnum wheeled around. Vargen.

“Yes.”

“Zohex’s bloodlusted vision blinded him.” Vargen pronounced. “Now the people have a worthy cause handed to them on a platter by the unstable minded Turanians.”

“Should we join them?”

“In good time Bahnum.”

“I made a promise on that dreadful day.”

“As did many others.”

“You know Vargen I came to find someone who had come here from another time. Instead...”

“I understand. Your place is with Devasi.”

“Why?”

“Complementarity.”

“?”

“Together your very apposite forces whence united will be a force even Merduk could not disentangle. Let alone the ghost of Zohex.”

“Ghost?” So something had been taken from Vahnsein. Zohex gone?!

“If that.”

“Then it is even more important if we joined this army.”

“You are mortal. You could die.”

“Death for me is an illusion, a barrier containing life. Devasi I feel is protected, maybe even invincible.”

Vargen agreed without saying so. It was enough to know.

“So what is it to be?”

“I will talk with Devasi and Maya.” Then turned back to their tiny camp.

“And I tell you Zohex is dead!” Kolic shouted over the babble of the gathered chieftains forming the rear guard, the sworn protectors of the citadel and the lands it no longer dominated. Dissent was simmering. The Turanian warlords were gathered outside at the foothills leading to not just Vahnsin but the whole mountain range which had protected them so admirably.

When Kolic and Finsterniss had described as to what happened in the banquet hall, to their godlike leader many of the warlords were sceptical. True the strange light was gone. It was considered by lesser wizards an omen that the heavens had taken from the advancing renegades the protection they had so far enjoyed by the benefice of heaven. Others more sceptical. But no one wanted to sound defeatist. Merduk left to his own devices.

“And how did he die then, by your own hand?” A Turanian warlord challenged.

“Perhaps Zohex only passed out, haha.” Laughter.

“No he is not only dead. He has vanished.” Pushing aside the horrific way his body had succumb to death.

“Zohex is no more.” An older voice proclaimed. They all turned to see who had spoken with such authority. It was Salum, Merduk’s confidante.

“Well then?” The first Turanian persisted.

“Necromancy.”

The make shift camp fell into an uncomfortable silence. Positioned on a minor but strategic hill surrounded by the last of their army. Those on the Dravidian Plains too far to be of use. A disoriented vigour surged in an invisible heaving mass through the warriors, the harlots, the common soldiers, their beasts of war. The pale sky giving the feeling of being open, vulnerable to the forces from beyond. Draining them of focussed

determination with a threatening impunity gestating, spawning whilst they pondered their optimum strategic alternatives. Shadows flickered amongst the crevasses, recesses of the vulnerable citadel. Looking less substantive. As if the vanishing light had drained something vital out of the very structure.

“Whose, Merduk’s?” Another wanted to know.

“I doubt it.” Salum replied easily. “Without Merduk Zohex would not even have been able to establish himself here.”

“Elburz.” Someone suggested.

They were guessing coming to grips that they were leaderless as well.

“Elburz.” A prominent chieftain spat.

“That would be no surprise.” Kolic replied. “He should have let that domain well alone. Leave it to the last. Instead...”

“We nearly slaughtered them into submission.” The first Turanian continued, his emotions barely under control. “Our southern army is mowing them down and moving the remnants towards us where Ahriman will rejoice in their final and total submission. We are nearly done with them. Then we march on Elburz.”

A murmur of consent buzzed through the camp. Thunder rolled over the eastern plain. A sickly green sky hung threateningly overhead.

“We must rely on ourselves.” Kolic getting back on track. “The renegades are closer. Squeezed between two armies it will be like harvesting souls for Ahriman. So who is to lead?”

Excitement broke out, everyone talking at once. There was no abatement.

“Warlords.” It was Finsterniss. “As Zohex expired I put my hand unto his head and his soul passed into mine.”

Silence. If that was true then Finsterniss would automatically assume the mantle of leadership in battle. Even Kolic was surprised knowing this to be a ruse. But a leader was sorely needed. Let the one most worthy on battle claim the mantle later. The first who had spoken asked, “Is this true?”

Kolic was in a quandary. If he did speak the truth Finsterniss was dead. If he lied they just might get away with it for they were the only reliable witnesses. Yet Finsterniss had outmanoeuvred Kolic who had set the sight of leadership for himself. To deny his friend the mantle might create a cleft right through them all. And now was not the time to make enemies. He assented to the reality of the occurrence.

“Yes. I saw it with my own eyes. We were about to take leave of the king when he was seized by violent spasms coming from within. Some powerful demon sent by some baleful adversary was finishing Zohex off. Perhaps it was the strange light in the sky. I was ready but Finsterniss did put his hand upon the king. Hoping to revive him, give him strength. But fate decreed otherwise.” Kolic shrugged. Glad that Finsterniss was not watching him. He knew what Kolic knew. “There was a light around them both.” He embellished.

It was enough. The gathered warlords turned to Finsterniss.

“I am making to claims,” Finsterness began aiming to set them at ease, “to the leadership itself. Just for the final battle. The gods will decide who will be worthy.” Surprising Kolic. Of course there might be those who would do away with Finsterniss. He did not envy him. Ominous thunder rolled across the sky.

That settled they got ready for battle. Some thought Finsterniss brash. Others feared that he really did possess Zohex’s occult powers. Fearing him as they had Zohex.

Luckily no blood was spilt to decide be contest who was more worthy. Victory was waiting.

“Finsterniss it is then.” The first Turanian acknowledged. But his eyes were adamant this was a temporary arrangement. Then they all bowed towards him, Kolic intending not to be sidelined later. Yet he too bowed in humble submission, a little stung that his protégé had outsmarted him. It was a lesson he would remember, for ever.

For the first time in weeks the stars were shining. Jewel lights inspiring the rebels. The quest for Vahnsin turning into a determined tidal wave of spiritual fervour to seek revenge for the death of Mudhan.

They had made camp at the junction of two streams. Sentries posted as they settled down for a final meeting prior their assault. Vargen, Mudhan, Devasi and Bahnum arrived. Their excitement rose. Bahnum could feel the rejuvenation, the surge of repressed fervour ready to unleash their repressed honour to wipe the Turanian scum off the earth.

The leaders made way for the four, considered holy, who enshrined in their own way Elburz’s resistance to the evil they were fighting.

“Warriors one and all.” Vargen’s voice boomed over the gathering of thousands. “Vahnsin is merely a shell. The majority of the murderers are to our south. But more importantly Zohex has vanished. He has not been seen with his men. If he is still present then he is hiding knowing the wrath that will descend upon him and the remnants who remain to serve.”

In the distance clouds were suffocating the dark edifice.

“Elburz is undefended. The Turanians to the south will sent a strike force there sooner than later. We must take the initiative. Strike where they are weakest. Here on the plains we would be massacred. So, we fight in the mountains and shred the heart of the evil empire.”

Most assented. Elburz was sacred to them.

“I have a plan.” Vargen said pleased with himself. Bahnum was glad. They all listened and when Vargen had finished they were in agreement. Jubilant shouts of joy echoed throughout the gathered army.

“To the mountains.” They shouted. Vargen had split the army in two. A smaller force was to go and wage guerrilla war at Elburz drawing the invaders off from connecting with Vahnsin. The rest went west to annihilate the remaining Turanians.

Kolic rode with Finsterniss at the head of the three columns that were to lead the assault on Elburz. Their southern army once finished with the Dravidians were to take some rest at Vahnsin and reinforce the skeleton army remaining behind. After several days of riding they approached the first foothills having met no resistance. The nomads along these plains vanished. Their camp was secured on a commanding hill. Some would have preferred to fight on the plains fearing Elburz’s power in the mountains. They all knew the lore of the powers of the elders. Which Finsterniss denied as mere humbug that madness would assail them. Those who succumbed to the tales were to become the reservists. And less honour in battle, less trophies, less women.

Scouts returned the next morning. Kolic one of the generals learnt that the renegades had strung themselves across the northern approaches. The other generals gathered.



“How?” Kolic asked one of the scouts.

“Virtually a line of defence.” Thinking they were undermanned.

“That simple?” Finsterniss asked incredulously. This was too easy.

“Yes.”

“No layered defences even?”

“No my lord.”

“Indeed then.” Finsterniss satisfied. “What do you think Kolic?”

“It looks like a desperate gamble defending Elburz and not levelling Vahnsin. Do you think they know Zohex is...no longer amongst us?”

“We must assume that at least. I also think the reason they took to the mountains is due to their inferior strength. They will have some advantages in the mountains.”

“Like Elburz’s necromancy.” One of the lesser generals said.

Finsterniss dismissed that thought with a wave of his arm. “I have the soul of Zohex within me. If Elburz tries anything then I will know exactly when they formulate their magic or their plans. Elburz is transparent to my occult sight.”

“So we will take the fight to the mountains.” Kolic said. “No diversionary tactics?”

“We could use the reserve column to harass the renegades on the plains but that would be mere sport and distract us from our objective to finish off Elburz. Something which even Zohex had never been game to take on.” Finsterniss confident. “And that was a mistake.”

“He was under the influence of Merduk.” Another general surmised.

“Yes. Merduk.” Finsterniss wondered. “He never bothered with Elburz which I find remarkable given the circumstances.”

“Yes?” Kolic curious.

“Consider. The renegades draw their inspiration from Elburz. We keep on defeating them but Zohex never sends out an expedition out here. Merduk stays silent. We slaughter and conquer the renegades to the south but never manage to defeat them entirely. Zohex instead is obsessed with Shaviscara. Whose kingdom is bitter ashes. We are told Ahriman rules there but I think that is a lie coming from Elburz. Still Zohex is fixated with the renegades to the south. Elburz grows stronger. No. I think we have made the right decision. Take Elburz. After that the renegades are nothing.”

“You speak wisely Finsterniss.” Kolic agreed.

“I should know for you have taught me well by your own example Kolic.” He put his hand on his comrade’s arm. “You do not think ill of me becoming supreme warlord?”

“No.” Kolic’s reply firm.

“If you think I have betrayed your trust speak now, before we bring Elburz down.”

“No.”

“But you are not pleased.”

The other generals were becoming more attentive.

“I would not have been pleased if you had continued the campaign on the plains. But now that we are finally finishing off a war that has continued for many generations, then the answer is I have no regrets. Fate and destiny is in the hands of the gods. I accept what is.”

“Good.” Finsterniss released his grip. “Tonight then we break camp. You Kolic will take the left flank. I will be in the centre and Hirach on our right.”

They were agreed. “As you command.”

“Hirach. Tonight we prepare for the final assault on the renegades. Our scouts inform us they have gathered across and not along the ridges. Their defence is simple. But by being spread across both valleys and ridges they hope to intercept us. They know it, we know it. Now I know that some of your tribes fear the power of Elburz. Rest assured that that is all in the past. Still to appease your men I have the following plan. Kolic and myself will lead the main assault. You will move up with us. Then I will drop back pretending I am having difficulties in advancing towards Elburz. You Hirach will move to the right, but split your forces and draw the renegades away from us. Basically a reserve force will then suffice in case anything goes awry. Your main body will pretend to be the reserve army. Kolic for a while will attract the brunt of the attack. You will draw the renegades on the right into a useless position for them to aid their army. Having achieved that you will then come to Kolic's aid.”

“And where will you be, later?” Kolic asked.

“Coming to aid you as well. Don't push them too hard. Make them believe you are not as strong as you are and as you retreat slowly we can come to your aid all the sooner. By the time we have defeated their main army their remnants will be useless. Any suggestions?”

They were satisfied.

Horses snorted, the din around them growing louder as they prepared themselves. The sun's weak rays casting a pall over the mountains. Whatever Merduk was up to remained to be seen. They were determined to rely on themselves. Finsterniss could feel the power surging through him. He knew his simple plan was foolproof.

“Should we move up the valleys or the ridges Finsterniss?” Hirach asked.

“In the valleys we are all vulnerable but we can move quicker. On the ridges we are easily seen so I suggest near the ridges. We may escape detection and surprise them.”

“What about the horses? If we move on foot we will be at their mercy.” Hirach continued.

“Have you seen their armour, their weapons? Hirach what we are facing is a peasant army, nothing more. They have no discipline. A many headed Hydra confused not just about any objective but the execution of that objective. They are only a rag tag rabble pretending to be an army.” He assured them all.

Kolic and Hirach nodded in agreement.

“What if they try to draw us towards Elburz?” Kolic considered. “Do we give chase?”

“No. we cannot over extend ourselves. If say, you Kolic move too far towards Elburz then the renegades can wheel around us and attack us from the rear. Doing exactly what we have on the plains, shepherding them. No, if they are trying to draw you out head for the ridges instead. Then you will be unassailable.”

“It will be done.” Kolic felt relieved.

“Hirach?” Finsterniss asked.

“It will be done lord.”

“Good. Let us break out some wine for our men now. Soon they will be asleep for we move in the night.” Finsterniss said lightly. He was looking forward to see his mistress and the wine, as they all were.

“Until tonight then.” And Finsterniss dismissed them. They had to inform the lower ranks of the overall battle plan.

That evening a mist descended from the mountains. The Turanians took the sign for what it was, a blessing. Finsterniss called a final gathering of the warlords and their captains. Instructions were given. Hirach would move up between the two ridges flanking Elburz to the south. Kolic would move up to the right, engage the enemy and draw them towards Finsterniss. Thus the rebels would have to split their forces making them easier targets for the Turanians. They swore an oath to Ahriman, then broke open the wine flasks.

The Renegades had split up. A lesser force ventured towards Vahnsin whilst the main body went to defend Elburz. They were getting into position in what seemed a desperate line of defence strung across the valleys and ridges. Scouts reported the Turanians moving up the ridges in three distinct battle groups. Messengers were sent to their two flanking groups calling their second in command for a final briefing. Vargen's commanders knew the battle plan and the ruse which ought to destroy the Turanian army. The gathering held in the dead of night recapped their original plan. Vargen knew many would die but then to fight them on the plains would have meant certain death anyway. The lieutenants left for their respective captains and commanders. The scene was set and the final battle about to begin.

Scouts reported the Turanian army were moving up in three pronged attack formations. By morning the renegades were ready. Vargen took centre position, Bahnum went with the third on their southern defensive position whilst the strongest chieftains would bear the brunt of the main attack on the northern approaches to Elburz.

'I can feel them coming.' Bahnum thought,, his heart racing. He never imagined himself to be in a battle. His aim had been to find the missing monk and instead was

caught in this time warp from whence he might not return. Not because he might fall in the heat of battle but because he had not as yet found the mandala that would allow him to return to his own time. He could of course create his own but that he would leave for later. Still if Vargen's plan succeeded then the danger threatening the future history of the planet would be obviated. He could live with that. but there was also another reason for his ambivalent attitude of whether to remain or not. Devasi. Even though he was a shaman it did not mean he had to remain celibate. He had never taken any Buddhist vows intending only to strengthen his own occult powers. Not exactly the correct attitude of a would be Buddhist. Devasi though seemed to exude such sweetness which had transformed his soul, his view of her as one lovely vision. Neither Vargen nor Maya were perturbed by this development. He pined for her.

For the moment Devasi and Maya had retreated to Elburz to help in any way they could to defeat the Turanians.

What had made Bahnum fall in love with Devasi was the simple fact that as they left she had said to him that she would with Maya's help protect him in battle. He had fallen to his knees to thank her and receive her blessing which she gladly gave. The last thing etched into his memory was her radiant smile. It gave him courage to face his destiny.

### **Elburz**

Kathan greeted Maya and Devasi in the main hall. Bahnum remained with the escorts who were given food and drink and shelter if they so wished. They ate and drank quickly, thanked the abbot for his hospitality but insisted on helping their beleaguered brethren in the mountains. Kathan gave them his benediction. He asked Maya and Devasi to follow him into their war room. The gathered elders acknowledged their presence with good grace then continued the creation of their battle mantras.

“You know what you must do.” Kathan said as they seated themselves separately in an adjoining room. In the main chamber the elders chanted focussing upon a void in

the centre of the floor. The abyss. Where unformed energies awaited their physical incarnation. Not the invaders.

Seated Kathan said: “Elburz is a sacred enclosure protected by the four cardinal towers. This edifice itself is a mandala as you might have surmised. We will be united in mind and soul, but separate in body. We must repress the attack at all costs. And we will.” He clapped his hand and three monks, dressed in the same uniform grey as Kathan entered.

“They will be our familiars so to speak, to back each of you if the Turanians decide to use their black arts which they surely will. You know of course Zohex is no more.”

Total silence and a sigh of relief from Maya. From the next chamber the drone continued in its steady resonance.

“It does not mean the Turanians are finished. It seems we have spurred them on to attack us directly. Something Zohex never contemplated. But then Zohex was extremely superstitious and rightly so. For the Turanians had tried once to take us by storm. And failed.” Kathan smiled. “In our respective towers the gates of infinity will open. You know how to use that with your powers. Infinity. A way to all possibilities. As we are agreed in what is to be accomplished there will be no discrepancies.”

“Kathan,” Maya asked, “the last time you defeated the Turanians it was by occult means. Surely after all this time they would have found means to counter both your attack and defence.”

“Yes and I hope they have.”

“Surely it will make our defence harder.”

“I doubt that.”



“Indeed?”

“There are many levels of power as you both know. By allowing the Turanians to think that we only have what they have experienced they will draw up their battle plans with that in mind. But this time it will not be so.”

“We seem to be entering this struggle with little, almost no preparation.” Maya sounded worried.

“That is part of the plan. You see the Turanians will know only what they have gleaned from your presence. They know of course what happened to Shaviscara and how he and his kingdom were defeated. They will assume the same tactics will be repeated here.”

“Which of course it won’t.”

“Yes Maya, that is why we have these monks to help us. They will take you to your respective stations and guide you to your goal. They are guardians.”

Maya and Devasi now looked at them intently. Each returning a smile. Of indeterminate age their faces were a sea of calm. It felt as if to them this coming battle was nothing, an interruption. More important things to be achieved later.

“What exactly is the plan Kathan?” Maya asked.

Another enigmatic smile. “Aid our friends of course.”

“But how exactly. I know your brothers are charging up potent mantras...”

“When Shaviscara and Lethena were neutered what plan was there?” Not admitting just how and who had been responsible for that. Maya understood. Conflict scenarios to destabilise the mind, then strike at the soul with vituperative venom cast from adamite spells drawing upon the open towers, the gates to infinity, beyond the comprehension of even enhanced mortals if not the gods themselves.

“I see what you mean.” Maya smiled in turn, feeling triumphant.

“Any other questions, Maya, Devasi?”

“Yes Kathan.” Devasi said. “Maya you too. When this is over and I feel confident we will survive then,” hesitating, “I wish to be with Bahnum.”

“And your current destiny?” Maya asked gently.

“There will be others.” She said simply.

“True. But you were chosen, you were meant to follow in my footsteps.”

“Yes that is true. But everything has changed, is changing. After this the world will be a different place.”

“All the more for you to take up the mantle and continue your work.” Maya actually making sure Devasi was not acting merely on a passing whim. She knew as well others could follow her. She was not that old yet.

“People, humanity,” thinking of the masses working the fields, market squares, holy processions, flowing along alleyways, mingling in bazaars, it was all the same definable mass, “do no mean that much to me.” Seeing the expression in their eyes, not caring, continuing, “I think it is time they took responsibility for themselves, for their own actions. I am sick of the burden I must carry, always it seems, for others.”

“As you progress along the path the burden eases.” Maya said kindly.

“Still. My heart, my mind is not into saving the human race.” Thinking of the evolutionary truncated Dravidians, the homicidal Turanians, the abandoned at Moerdrum, all united with one underlying thread. Their reliance on shamans of one kind or another. Thereby allowing the rest, lesser races to atrophy, fall back mentally, fall out of reality.

“How long have you felt this?” Maya concerned. The mantras next door were droning an octave lower. The three priests there to support them had gone to their respective cells to craft protective mandala’s around the three of them.

“Not until we made our escape. Leaving Shaviscara’s realm, my birthplace. It opened my eyes. For the first time I felt free of the occult storms raging in my soul.”

“But that is the very reason for you destiny.”

“To stop these necromancers from corrupting this planet?”

Maya concerned whether Devasi’s decision had a broader effect. It could decide if Bahnum were to stay or not.

“Devasi. You belong to the sacred guardians.” Maya trying to appease her.

“I wish to find my own destiny, my own centre of belonging. Not to have to be for ever ready due to bumbling peasants or selfish rulers not thinking through their actions and not forgetting stupid priests who think only they are connected, and when they are they get themselves in trouble. Maya, Kathan it never changes.”

“It does Devasi. But change is slow, incremental.” Kathan explained.

“I want to find my own way.” Turning to her. “Will you join me?”

“What if the Turanians win?” Meaning was she that relevant to the cause.

“Then time will reverse itself.” Kathan revealed. “Or rather, fracture. For the conquered it would reverse, enthrall them into bondage. For the rules time would cease for they would wish to continue as they were. For them time would stop. And if they then conquer this young planet, well, the scenario would be abysmal.”

“You see?” Maya smiled lovingly.

“All because of me? I don’t think so.” Shaking her head defiantly. “If the Turanians are destined to rule then they will irrespective of what I wish or what I can

accomplish. There are other realms in which I can expand and perhaps use my positive influence to strengthen...”

“To give up, just like that?” Maya dismayed.

“Yes. Ever since I can remember I have been used.” She was adamant.

“And go where?” Maya now exasperated. None had expected this.

“There are other places.” Devasi putting on a prim pose. “The world is bigger than this continent which is for ever it seems labouring under too much occult power. It will all self destruct one day and I do not wish to be any part of it. I have glimpsed the future. And not just one.” She looked with certainty at each one of them. “There are many. It depends on one’s individual actions. If the Turanians win then as Kathan said, time will reverse and cease to have any effect globally as long as they rule through their dark god Ahriman. If they are defeated they would have to be exterminated. Otherwise this occult muck which we are constantly fighting will continue as long as Ahriman’s spawn exists. And to tell the truth, I am sick of it all.”

“Child...”

“No! No more. Let them stew in their encloaked vomit, their pathetic spells and infantile charms and their pretentious ancient knowledge. It is all a millstone around my neck and those who want to be free of this psychic assault and invasive burden. If the Turanians win it is because they deserve to win. I don’t care anymore.” Her eyes blazing.

“Devasi you are right about one thing.” Kathan said soothingly.

“What? Only one?” suppressing a giggle.

“Not caring if the Turanians win. That is the strength we use here. It is also the only way of defeating them.”

“Perhaps.” Wavering a little.

“Fight this last battle. Or more correctly, void this last battle.” A twinkle in Kathan’s eyes. Devasi relented somewhat. “The Turanians want this place so we can let them have it.” Smiling mischievously. “For a while. Surely you would not wish to miss out on that.”

Devasi laughed. Maya was relieved and Kathan overjoyed.

“You know Devasi that none of us can force you to stay.” Maya began. “In fact it would be dangerous to do so, for you to remain against your wishes. So whatever you do you have my blessing.”

“Thank you, thank you all.”

“It is settled then?” Kathan solicitous.

Devasi nodded. She was certain. One last fling.

“Then let us retire each to one watchtower.” Kathan rising. Their attendants appearing, ready.

Outside the main hall, the chanting another octave lower, more a rumble now, they parted with their aides. Kathan taking the North eastern tower, facing the enemy squarely. Maya flanking in north west. because through Vargen Kathan knew how the attack would unfold. Devasi took the south west, acting as rearguard and anchor whilst one of the senior monks meant to bolster their defence in the south eastern tower.

Upon entering her allocated tower Devasi was astonished that the darkness here was palpable. Filled with latencies hovering at the brink of recognition, just beyond conscious reach. As it should be. It made her feel better. She looked at her escort but his face was at ease, expressionless. Not plagued by emotive responses or intellectual doubts. Her confidence rose. Wending their way through narrow corridors. The darkness impregnated with the past of the last attack by the Turanians prior Zohex’s arrival.

Soldiers being swept by ferocious winds off the approaching track up the mountain. Boulders falling upon the rear guard and their supplies smashing to splinter the heavy wagons and their struggling beasts. Sending winds of sleet and snow to obscure their progress. Billowing mists to hide the defenders as they rained death upon the invaders. It seemed they had not learnt their lesson.

Devasi wondered about Merduk since it was claimed that Zohex was finished.

Her escort picked up her thoughts. “Yes. Merduk.” They were at the base of the tower. He opened a solid stone door by merely using his hands. If it was that easy...”Not anybody’s hand Devasi.” Guessing her thought.

“Ah.”

At the foundation of nothing. Just the circular stairs reaching dizzily upwards. They started the long ascent. The palpable darkness absent. The tower more a void than a presence. Lightening her concerns which vanished. Impregnating ethereal energy. She was feeling better. Almost drifting up the stairs. Closer to the stars.

“Merduk probably kept Zohex in power whilst holding Shaviscara at bay. That was the impression we got. Whether that did any good is now irrelevant. One thing is certain if not a little puzzling.” Taking some breaths as they climbed. “With Zohex removed, Merduk’s resonance seems to be lesser. Stranger still prior when he was present his resonance was more of a shell, a projected persona, hiding his essence, his substance whilst his outer self acted. And even then unlike other shamans Merduk basically did nothing. There is something...otherworldly about him Devasi.”

“Maybe when this is over,” now feeling certain it would all work out in their favour, “I may meet this Merduk.”

Her escort continued to lead the way up.

“And now that light in the sky is gone.”

“Yes. Remarkable. A star that came so close it blotted out the rest of the sky. I am wondering if it kept something out, stopped through its irradiance something from happening because it coincided with Zohex’s vanishment.”

“Really?”

“Which leaves the question whether this is good or bad news.”

“Surely it is good.” Breathing a little heavier.

“We can safely assume Zohex was extracted. But was that for a reason only to send someone more potent to return or is this the end.” Her escort, her double seemingly not too concerned.

“All I know is what I was taught. That I belong with the element of fire. Celestial and earthly. That it times I am the Destroyer if need be,” Her inner energy surging just at the thought of her potential, felling extremely good, “and I hope to, if I can, if I must, to destroy your enemies. Maya was always steering me into a vacancy. As was Vargen. And now...”

“Vacancy is good.”

“It is?”

“One way to defeat the enemy.”

“How.”

“Remove the elements, the substance of their reality with which they attack us.”

“?” Though something niggled at the back of her head that this was the right way to approach the homicidal hordes. Bent on their destruction, infusing and infused with the base elements of war, of blind hatred, of raging ferocity, with dissolute emotional egoism. All woven into them, which the sages here would make sure either consumed

them or if not, Devasi finding it remarkably easier to comprehend their orientation, remove the very ground of their existence and if that failed through their shamans, unleash Devasi's apocalyptic fire.

They had reached the top of the stone stairs. Her escort worked an intricate lock which clicked open with a series of whirrs as if cogged wheels were involved.

Pitch black. Even her escort had vanished.

"Take your time adjusting." Said the disembodied voice.

"Err, no pitfalls in here? Any furniture to fall over?" Shuffling to what she thought was the centre. Her feet found some cushions.

"Good. Make yourself comfortable. Assume your sacred position."

She did.

"I will think of nothing, act upon nothing, plan nothing, make contact with nothing." He informed her.

She knew what he was doing. Weaving camouflage around her. Make her nothing to any probing mind. After some time of concentrating on her recumbent self, where the divine spark resided now ready to explode she felt its warmth suffuse throughout her, body, mind and soul. With something vaster. The other three towers plus the central hall where the monks were creating mantras to unhinge the minds of the Turanians. Weaving a deceptive veil of incumbent madness. Devasi was feeling good. She was glad she had changed her mind.

The muffled sound of the enemies unhinged minds approaching was unmistakable. The mists still clung to the valleys but the renegades knew the country better than the Turanians who feared these mountains under the protection of Elburz. The



shuffling of arms and pack animals, the quiet curses of men, the sounds of rocks rolling down into the valleys as the three columns of the Turanians slowly advanced towards the defence of the renegades.

Regrouping. What had been a thin line of defence slowly merged into three distinct battle groups, still strung horizontally across but now occupying the ridges, commanding the valleys. Raiding parties detached themselves harassing the Turanians. Who were unprepared for guerrilla warfare. The shrieks of men stabbed in the back, others felled as their horses stumbled into simple traps, their brains dashed as catapulted rocks smashed them to a bloody pulp and lethal arrows finding their marks from a safe distance.

Devasi saw it all. She felt for Bahnum as an ugly Turanian known as Hirach made an attempt to break through his body of men. But they held their ground. The Turanians at a disadvantage having taking the lower ground to try and not be detected during their advance. No such luck.

The renegades attacked. The battle creating a pall of dust around the armies. The maddened horses, dying and wounded men, the clash of arms, splattered gore and disembowelled soldiers, severed legs, smashed bones, heads like burst water melons, the melee a frenzy of bloodlust and murder. While Bahnum was stabbing at mounted Turanian and foot soldiers alike, covered in blood and gore, fighting like a man possessed Devasi saw the main force of the Turanians disengage. Needed elsewhere. It gave her hope. The rebels were not losing as yet.

Bahnum's men quickly had a small troop of the enemy surrounded. None thought of mercy. Everyone remembered Mudhan's fate. They were slaughtered, their weapons stripped for their own use. No time to take their amulets or jewellery. Elsewhere hand to

hand combat was fierce but they were literally cutting the Turanians into ribbons. Some rebels were trampled by the war horses sometimes friend and foe could not be told apart but the rebel's courage and desperation butchered the Turanians relentlessly. With captured horses they gained in strength.

As the main body of the Turanians retreated Devasi hoped it was not a trap to lead Bahnum's men into a premature jaw of death. But fear turned into exhilaration. Two of the rebel battle groups had annihilated Kolic's column with Finsterniss's relief columns arriving too late. They had been lost thanks to the invasive mantras of Elburz. By then Vargen and Bahnum had combined into a mighty roaring tidal wave of deadly revenge. Hacking their way into the midst of the Turanians they chopped, hacked, stabbed, bludgeoned, blinded, clubbed or stoned them to death. For Hirach had been distracted long enough by Bahnum to make the fatal mistake of being indecisive. For the Turanians had hoped to isolate Bahnum who instead had isolated them. And whilst Hirach had left a diversionary force to harass Bahnum, Bahnum had responded likewise, smashed Hirach's diversionary column, descended upon Hirach's main force who then had no chance in either helping Finsterniss across the next ridge let alone Kolic's hard pressed men who were themselves sucked into a deadly cauldron of war Vargen had prepared for them.

As the rebels three battle groups coalesced into two flanking armies the Turanians had been totally caught off guard. With Hirach annihilated Vargen's second division descended upon Kolic's men. As planned they retreated hoping to find Finsterniss ready to come to his aid. But with Hirach virtually wiped out Finsterniss had his hands full holding Bahnum's attack at bay. That gave enough time for Vargen to finish Kolic whilst Kathan's mantras confused Finsterniss long enough to allow Bahnum to advance. As he did the remains of Kolic's army kept the rebels engaged. The Turanians might win yet.

But it was not to be. With Hirach's group in total disarray and having suffered the worst casualties, the forces of the two armies were more even, something the Turanians never expected. Still the jabbing, maiming orgy of war continued. But the rebels now had the advantage of having possession of the ridges, again. It was just a matter of time. Vargen and Bahnum descended onto the disorganised remnants of Kolic and Finsterniss and as these two never quite united into a common front against the rebels they instead managed to divide and murder the Turanians who had escaped into the valleys. In a last frenzy Bahnum turned his men into a screaming avenging scythe of death. They ran amok the disoriented Turanians, slaying men with fervent glee. The screams of death rode in a majestic crescendo of divine madness over the hills, assailing the very night.

With the coming of dawn it was certain the Turanians had been thoroughly massacred. Disembowelled corpses, quivering bodies with hacked off limbs, protruding ribs, stumps of spurting blood, gouged eyes, dislocated jaws, glistening gore, shining intestines, palpitating innards covered the valleys and hills.

The light began to paint the eastern sky a crimson red as if the heavens had been tainted by the blood of the fallen. The vanquished enemy was just so much fodder for the beasts of prey in the mountains. Vultures circled overhead, wild dogs howled in the distance, the rebels gathered what booty they could from the mangled mass, the refuse of Ahriman. Discarded souls, wasted minds. The light grew brighter as the sun cleared the ridge to the east of Elburz painting the citadel in a rich golden hue.

“Devasi. It is done.”

She suddenly realised she had been in trance. Neither asleep nor wakeful to her austere surroundings. She opened her eyes and saw the sun shining through one of the tower's portals.

"Is it over? Are we free. Was Elburz successful?"

"Yes. Along with Vargen, Kathan, our selves, Maya and Bahnum. Come refresh yourself, we have guests to greet."

"At last. You know I never thought this day would come."

"But you knew in your heart."

"Even though I did not do anything."

"You did."

"How?"

"If I told you I would give away the greatest secret of Elburz." He replied easily.

"So even though I helped you to defeat not just Shaviscara, Zohex and now the Turanians you will not tell me how we achieved the liberation of this land. How are we to defend ourselves against future enemies then?"

"As we have done previously." He smiled enigmatically.

## **Balkh**

Thick heavy snow laden clouds hung over the lightless damp of the mountains. The whining pitch of struggling jeeps rattled their way over muddy tracks. A biting

northerly wind lashed the advancing Soviet soldiers. The drizzling sleet bit into their faces. Icy glacial mists surrounded them at times reducing visibility to nearly nothing.

Colonel Dubrov his round face stung by the bitter weather was silent as they wound their way up the treacherous slope of the destroyed fortress. Besides him Marshall Zhukov was perplexed as to why the KGB and not the GRU had been given precedence in what he considered his field of operation. Dubrov told him politely this excursion was more important than simply gathering military information.

Dubrov still smarted from the resistance these insurgents and dished out. The loss of eight helicopters, good gunships had confirmed previous reports as to the overall importance of this rebel stronghold. Saturation bombing had levelled two of the citadels to smoking rubble. Chemical warfare had spread suffocating mists over the land, rain etching the poison into the soil.

Then they waited.

Shuja's men had taken to the hills after the chemical saturation of the area. Now a frored drizzle swirled around them, discolouring the slushy snow drifting down from winter's steely grey sky. The land was empty, the people fled leaving only a barren carcass of desolation. Now with the rebels gone Dubrov was relieved that at last this episode was at an end. The emptiness and the overwhelming silence around them verified that no resistance would be encountered. The enemy had vanished.

Dubrov asked the marshall casually if he knew why Konstantin Semenov had wished to come to this forsaken hole. They had passed, to the marshall's surprise the forts of the now defeated leaders wondering where Dubrov's intentions lay. Apparently somewhere else. Zhukov shrugged his shoulders with vague indifference, hiding his irritation, muttering under his breath.

“Archaeological ruins.” Dubrov delighted in knowing something Zhukov did not. “My dear comrade,” he began relishing the idea that at least he could reveal that much, “Semenov had an outrageous theory. According to him these people had some sort of association with the infamous Assassins. Their aim though, unlike the Assassins was to create a mental mutation, a mind set which could kill at a distance their target.”

Zhukov stared blankly at Dubrov.

“Surely comrade colonel you don’t believe such gibberish?” Only too aware of ‘remote sensing’. Studied even by the Americans. If the Afghanis were naturals then they might well and truly get totally fucked now and then.

Dubrov was thinking of operation Black Magic. Maybe the GRU were the grunts here. That thought made this excursion even more pleasurable. “Ah, at first not. But it was a good way as any to survey this area, using Semenov as the necessary cover. He was to lead a scientific expedition here. Naturally it was an intelligence mission. But when he was murdered in Peshawar we became suspicious.” And interested he thought.

“Naturally.”

“According to Semenov, “ Dubrov ploughed on as were the struggling jeeps, “these people here defeated some of the greatest armies ever. Not only that. They left a negative psychic impression on their enemies, such as Alexander the Great.”

“But he died in Babylon. Wine and women...” Zhukov wondering who had lost the plot here.

“Still, he died young. Ashoka retreated from here and the British never really gained a foothold for any length of time. But to get to Semenov’s point. That the tribe in this area, for countless generations are masters of paranormal warfare.”

“Was Semenov suggesting their use of psychological warfare created the defeat of their enemies?” Thinking if so then what? Take out the entire region’s population. Or ship them back somewhere to Siberia? Study them at their leisure. There were ways.

“That is what he wished to prove. At first we doubted the very idea. However the mission was given clearance by Andropov himself.” He paused. “The KGB is most interested in, shall we say, more clandestine methods of control and command executions.”

“Voodoo warfare.” Zhukov pretending to be not convinced. Dubrov gushing.

“There is more marshall. The Gauls used giant war harps to terrorise the Roman legions...”

“They still lost.”

“...well Semenov argued that the way to attune the mind to these certain covert states of assault and destructive parameters were embedded in the place itself. Charged up. A sort of fount of negative energy. Potent. Strengthening the mind’s hidden capabilities and weakening that of the enemy through subversive and destructive psychosomatic impulses, frequencies, wavelengths, whatever thus crippling through refined mental techniques the will and possibly the life of the enemy.”

“Hm.” Zhukov a mask of scepticism. He was aware parapsychology was not frowned upon in the Soviet Union and that the CIA were experimenting with all sorts of drugs to achieve certain killer mind sets. “Sounds outlandish. Anyway comrade colonel, how come you know so much about this?” Fearing that Dubrov whilst a colonel might be much more in reality. Not unusual. Just as secretaries might be important operatives in their embassies, with more power than the ambassador so Dubrov could be one such operative. He might even be a general unofficially. He would humour him. It was not his

mission if nothing happened. Then smiled. They were doing a recce so that if this hair brained idea came to nothing Dubrov was in the clear. No matter whatever did or did not occur.

“Semenov was after not so much the method but the source of their psychopathic inspiration. That the planet was covered with these potent sites. One to which we are headed. And there is more...”

“There always is.”

They bumped over a small brook, splashing through its crystal clear waters.

“There were some westerners sniffing around. Almost verifying our interest. In fact I can reveal to you that their intention had not been to study this phenomena but to destroy it. Pure sabotage.”

“And?”

“We took them out.”

“So they gave credence to this theory?”

Up over a crest with the valley close, over the next range.

“Must be.” Not revealing the conversation with the countess. Her team liquidated. Disembowelled she might have to return to her homeland unless the department had other plans for her. If anything she was resourceful. And so far her cover was holding.

“So what do you expect to find?”

“A tablet.”

“That it? Pure archaeology?”

Dubrov said no more. What the tablet was, what it might represent, whether it was some sort of activating mechanism he would not reveal. They were here to retrieve it.

“Orders Marshall Zhukov.”



“You realise of course I have my orders as well.”

“I’m sure you do.” Dubrov dubious.

“That once you have retrieved this tablet I am to demolish the site. There is enough semtek to blow up the whole mountain range. Anyway the country is now pacified. What remains are mere irritants. The so called mujahedin can do little no matter what. We are about to seal the border with Pakistan and Iran. Then we clean up the mess and be done with it. They are finished. There is something that does intrigue me.”

“Yes?”

The jeeps slithering down the final hill before the last crest.

“If this place is so precious to the locals, where are they?”

Dubrov answered easily. “The forts here we levelled. The rebels dispersed. I mean this ruin we are seeking might be defensible from within but our aerial reconnaissance assures me there is no recent activity.”

“Good.”

The jeeps revved their way onwards into the bleak mountains, slipping occasionally upon the wet muddy track. The sky was dismal, washed out, the accompanying soldiers silent. Dubrov shuddered partly from sitting in the freezing wet cold vehicle and partly worrying of an ambush. As far as Semenov’s theory went they had dispensed with it. They were in control of most of the country. Nothing untowards had occurred. No unusual events reported. He could see Zhukov’s more realistic appraisal. Armies could only extend so far. That of Alexander’s was, back then, so far from whence they had come they had reached the limits of their expansion. Ditto Ashoka. And as for the British, the same. Afghanistan was hostile country and easily defended. It was no more than that. Dubrov just hoped the tablet was there. A trophy at least.

“Don’t worry Dubrov. Their last post has to be verified as neutralised. Interesting ideas though. And you say Androponov actually agreed?” Zhukov laughed. “I think he was humouring you. But it was, is I should say an excellent idea to come this way under the auspices of historic research. Good cover. And what the westerners failed to do we will finish.”

Dubrov was speculating how these people believed their own folklore. It was not so outrageous. There were still peasants in the backwoods of the Carpathian Mountains who clung to all sorts of outlandish crap. Not even scientific socialism made an impression upon them. He lit a cigarette, plundered American stock taken from some supermarket. Still, these people must live in a strange shadow world, that much was certain. Stuck in the Middle Ages. But could mythology stop an army? It had not stopped theirs.

They wound their way through desolate hills huddled under the dripping sky. Sleet once more descended around the countryside washing out the contours, all colour and all life. The only sound that of their struggling engines negotiating what was nothing but a goat track. Shivering Dubrov wondered why he was cold when it was colder in his home country. Feeling himself to be in a grey void. The jeeps laboured over the last ridge and there it was.

Broken ruins littered the valley. At its northern end the entrance. Black. Forbidding. Immersed in an aura like a dank web impregnated by its own eviscerated crepuscular gloom. Dubrov threw out his cigarette. They pulled up and Zhukov was first out the jeep. Ordering his soldiers to fan out, securing the perimeter. Guards were posted around the gaping entrance of the ruined temple. Zhukov, Dubrov and a small contingent made their way towards the entrance.

Stale air. A muffled silence, redolent as they entered. The great cavern, once they adjusted their eyes to the dark were flanked by ornamental columns. Their flashlights stabbed beams of light into the ancient mausoleum. Nothing to indicate anything of the past, columns aside. No bits of pottery or bones of any kind. Zhukov marched resolutely forwards. Dubrov knew they were to look for an especial cavern or room or niche containing the artefact. He drew out his pistol walking warily, alert to the slightest sound. Only that of their footfalls. They found a few recesses all vanishing into collapsed corridors.

The temple complex felt dead, devoid of life. They saw only the damp shadows of their flashlights, the glistening reflections of light along wet dripping walls trudging through stagnant pools of brackish water. No scuttling rodents or other scavengers. Did Afghanistan have bears? Dubrov wondered. Their boots echoed solemnly reverberating in resounding diffusion amongst the silence of long gone ages.

Dubrov found the putrescent atmosphere difficult to inhale. Instinctively he turned left and his torch found a small entrance which smelt even stronger of damp and dirt. He saw the spiralling stairwell lead into the darkness below. Black as black can be. Dubrov called to Zhukov and showed them the entrance.

“This is it?” Zhukov unimpressed.

“According to Semenov, yes.”

“So, let’s do it.”

The chamber was ordinary. Dark walls of inky blackness made it look larger than it was. The beams of light reflected a matt finish almost absorbing the photons as they struck the walls. Then they saw the odd dark shapes almost invisible against the ebon background. An odd glow played about and lit up their moulded dimensionality which as

they shone their torches upon them looked like grotesque statues, utterly inhuman, yet they hoped, human nevertheless. The air solid as if having absorbed centuries of ancient life and death. The silence felt odious. Movement seemed to be resisted by an imposing languor. Dubrov's body felt heavy, tired, exhausted.

Gazing warily about him, in slow motion, trying to penetrate the sepulchral darkness. From their torches patters of sere light flickered vibrantly along the seemingly chiselled adamite statues. In a circle their darker eyes focussing on a raised dais. Covered with a black stone or slab. Dubrov's foot stumbled upon something. There on the floor lay maybe the tablet, smudgy inscriptions ingrained upon the surface. It must have toppled from its altar during the bombing. Forgetting the one whence these frightening semblances mocking life concentrated upon.

He called to Zhukov who was relieved that they had found the artefact. They called four soldiers to lift the tablet. The men put down their assault rifles, bent their knees and raised the ancient object upon their shoulders like a coffin.

The lights amongst the statues flickered nervously. A soft glow bathed the solid entities in their hideously crafted horror, their faces hinting at the pleasure of some sinister sport. Dubrov felt an oddness about them as if their stony muteness contained a circumscribed life. On the verge of trembling hinting at an immanence of movement struggling to break their enchained form. Shadows flitted about. Dubrov wondered if this play of light was real for the walls seemed to be pulsing like slow moving cataracts threatening to become sweltering waves of nothingness.

As he moved towards the altar or dais for one final look at this centre of this strange chamber his boots felt the resistance of something soft, viscous. In the incongruous darkness he saw to his consternation several prostate bodies grotesquely

distorted and shockingly mutilated. Pools of shiny dark blood oozed from them through the many hideous and viciously induced wound. Horrid deep cuts frantically pierced by so many disgusting and violent actions of their perpetrators. By the look of the butchered madness they must have struggled desperately in their contracted death throes trying to gain an escape from this chamber of horrors. Small blooded clots of innards were strewn randomly over the grim slippery floor.

Dubrov heard one of the soldiers vomit. As his torch played about the massacre the beam shone into a dark adumbration. There in one corner squatted a human. He looked Mongol, his face an appalling expression of hate, his sallow skin and long black hair heightening his empty eyes that seemed yet to stare from one eternity to another, his gaze suspended penetrating unknown depths of hell.

They were all taken aback by this hideous revelation. A resounding bang boomed through the chamber. The soldiers in their horrified surprise had dropped the tablet. Dubrov felt the atmosphere thicken even more. The soldiers, veteran fighters looked both frightened and wasted, jabbering. Dubrov noticed the uniforms of the mutilated bodies were that of their own.

Rooted to the spot. His vague, disturbing, sudden premonitions were becoming uncomfortably real. The wasted façade of the Mongol smiled hideously. Shadows began to move near the walls. The black infinite eyes held Dubrov's. From the corner he saw the stilted movements of the statues as they began to extend into space, moving ghosts trembling with solid substance bearing down upon them.

Desperately Dubrov looked around, his head thick and heavy, his thoughts sluggish. A septic glow emanated from the black horrors, a flickering deliquescent ectoplasm pour over his soldiers. They looked like origami shadows as the statues

embraced them in their deathlike vice. Their arms with razor sharp angles slicing into their screaming victims. Dubrov heard it all along with moaning scarring sounds. The soldiers mock frozen, stilted, solidified frame by frame, discolouring their uniforms as the knife edges of the embracing arms and spiked statuesque bodies dug deep into the soldiers flesh, blood seeping from their uniforms, expanding on the floor amongst the remnants of earlier prey.

Swathed in a fading luminescence the suffuse chiaroscuric shapes muffled the whimpers of his dying men. Some screamed in violent defiance. The shadow shapes fastened their deleterious grip on the struggling writhing soldiers unable to reach for their rifles. Moments later they were mere twitching bodies, their throats gurgling blood mingled with the stifling ordure on the floor. The statues dropped their limp bundles. Wet spongy thuds amongst more discarded carrion.

Dubrov finally managed to fire of a few shots but the bullets ricocheted around the hell wrought chamber. Staring at the hopelessness of it all. His belaboured mind struggled with even the simple thought of escape. The statues seemed to melt into the walls. The eldritch smile of the sinister plenipotentiary spoke in hideous laughter echoing around the oppressive vault. He wanted to move away from his own morbid fascination trying to elude the calm smile of the Mongol's decayed face. Its gleaming burning eyes stopped him short of any movements regarding using his limp hand and useless gun. The Mongol revelled in his victory, his face a gloating mask of supremacy.

With the statues gone Dubrov wondered if what he had seen had been nothing but a redolent vision drawn from something out there which had been etched into his defenceless mind. But still there were convolute patterns on the walls, oblique insanities

hell bent on his death. Yet they were somehow and for some reason he could not fathom held in check by the demented Mongol.

Still, vile iniquities resonated their monstrous essences in the chamber. A distant voice told him to kill this image. He still had his gun and discharged the chamber with rapid fire into that adumbration. The splashing blood and splintered bone covered him with Zhukov's gore. The bleeding broken corps of his comrade collapsed amongst the other butchered bodies.

The Mongol smiled with satisfaction. The tepid light faded, the darkness resumed its nocturnal embrace. The dark tablet lay drunkenly upon the disembowelled soldiers. Dubrov, now filled with a violent rage, almost demented with vituperative hatred of what had occurred managed to lift the tablet on his own and staggered up the stairs with his heavy burden. His mind in turmoil the only sense he could make was that these adumbrated beings had immense power to frighten and to kill their chosen victims. But Dubrov was not one to succumb so easily to horror driven living lore. Having exhausted their pent up energy they had receded. It was enough for Dubrov to make his escape with the artefact. Under controlled conditions...but he dwelt on it no more.

The charges were set at both the entrance and the suggestive cavern within. The wiring secure the detonation buried the temple with half a mountain collapsing onto the foul sussurating sore bleeding its demented madness under tons of rock.

### Vahnsin

Savarna followed the archimage with a feeling of rising anticipation. The location revealed in Varanasi moving towards her apex in this temple in a time history barely remembered. Her husband no longer of any consequence. Though of some use initially Sarvarana considered her practical knowledge of the ancient arts as opposed to Abu's intellectual appreciation meant, having come this far, that she was at the portal where her destiny would be fulfilled, eternity embraced. She was after the very source of the temple's and it's ancient racial memory, the gateway to their supremacy. Dousing her in true cosmic power. In an age when the universe was far more potent. Pregnant with super charged energies creating an altogether different genesis to that which was remembered. An evisceration of the truth.

She considered herself well prepared. A whole lifetime's worth. Through elder lore and what she gleaned from the mantic arts she knew she was immune to whatever secrets the ebon abyss contained. She had crossed it once getting here. Remembering how fragments of ancient documents told of how an abominable disaster had struck the impatient seeker instantly annihilating the foolhardy or the arrogant of mind whose greed for the ultimate, the wanton possession of ultramundane secrets brought about their ruin.



Savarna's approach was more humble even if the aim was the same. One Abu had failed at.

The overbearing light in the sky was gone. The stars shining serenely once again. It gave her confidence and hope that an inimical incursion had been removed. Reality clearer. With Merduk they left the citadel which Savarna took in one last time. Still amazed at its awesome imposing power whence its rulers had nearly conquered her continent. Now oddly depleted. Etched into its structure the ruin it was soon to be. Devoid of life, devoid of substance. Another level of discordant power removed. Why the renegades had so feared what was nothing but a mental projection was beyond her. But something was certain: the resurrected madness enshrined within its massive structure was now dissipated with the demise of Zohex Merduk reassured her.

They walked across the empty courtyard, utterly desolate towards the temple. Above low angry flashing clouds. Like a distant echo of vanished times. Savarna appraised the zigurath wondering if here had been, was now, the original prototype later constructed in Babylon. Or whether indeed it had also been the famous tower destroyed by a jealous, angry if not psychotic god. An incensed mentally unstable entity bent on destroying a brilliant architectural edifice meant to probe the very secrets of the cosmos.

They entered the portals of the now desolate entrance. Apparently they were the only two remaining. The priests and novices vanished. The two huge carven serpentine beasts now as lifeless as the countryside around them. Even the guards were absent. The citadel behind dead quiet. The Turanians engaged in battle at the mountains guarding Elburz. Merduk acknowledged it would aid their intentions with no distractions immanent. His smile though hiding his volition regarding their endeavour. Within huge engraven twisted columns reminding Savarna of the ancient caves of Adjanta. Delighted

when Merduk led her down a spiral staircase just like the one in Afghanistan where Shuja was meditating, where the tablet, something not revealed prior her arrival was ensconced.

Merduk kneeled in front of the dais and its black object. She followed suit assuming her lotus position, concentrating not on the adamite object but living Kali. Merduk began to intone archaic formulae intended to gather here the stellar forces of his universe.

Merduk explained that the core of the tablet, was actually an inchoate absence of all things. This void was in itself a something which had to be approached with a neutral mind. It was not to be approached as an end in itself, nor explored as a universe of its own.

Savarna for her part was focussed through her mantras upon the emissary of Death, Yana who as the abstract principle of destruction burnt away from the mind all which might hamper her progress across the great abyss of space. She called upon the counterbalancing power of light to guide the way using the essence of the two gods to give her protection on this perilous journey, enmeshing herself in their potent and pregnant power for Shiva, giver of life and death was Kali's consort. She had no trouble fusing the two complementary forces of these two gods into one dynamic power.

What Merduk was after was making contact with WebSpace, distorted though Zohex's presence by a containment field which now absent ought to make Merduk able to cross back into his own time located galaxies away in distant space. This mandala, a jump gate the means of achieving his departure. But it was only to be tested. Before leaving permanently he wished a last discourse with the elders of Elburz. They seemed to be progenitors of this race of Earther's with capabilities way beyond those who inhabited the planet.

Aware that Savarna was not here as a mere traveller, present out of curiosity. He respected her courage. She like the elders was after pure power. Though she believed in her gods he knew she knew they were energetic projections encloded by the ever restless ever moving mantle of Maya. Her race a remarkable people. Merduk also wanted to comprehend the reverberation of this planet which according to his own race was deemed a threat to their resonance. If that were so then it was worthy not just of study but also of possession, absorbing this alien spectrum for Merduk had a thought. If he could achieve this then he would become a power in his own right. A planet's worth. Something he had not sought originally. But the opportunity was too good to ignore. What he would do with this power he had as yet no idea. In their flawed wisdom back on Prima they were trying through the Deep Visionaries to negate this pulsing surge and repel it. With which they were not succeeding.

Merduk feeling benevolent explained that the vibrant darkness at the centre of the mandala allowed through its inherent alignment within this part of the universe the mind of the supplicant to virtually be part of infinity. Savarna so far the only human who actually related to all this. None other here had. Certainly not Zohex wherever he was. Merduk warned her that there was the danger that her subconscious racial memories within her sentient self could create a dynamic process within this absolute space. Her very conscious presence could constitute the collapse through chaos through the trigger of her mind's inner essence. What she was truly aiming for. Residual thoughts, psychic images and their encompassing psychic phenomena could truncate her aim and draw her onto her own preconditioned reality, not that of the dominant abyss itself.

With Zohex vanished Merduk was aware that his containment field, now collapsed back into the abyss. Removing the limitations imposed on WebSpace. Savarna wanted in and he wanted out. An interesting mix.

Geometrical patterns in the form of an expanding cube was replicating the contents of the artefact with the Earth and themselves now at the centre. He had accessed WebSpace. This galaxies glowed at the centre, sparkled with millions of stars at their periphery. Cushioned in Earth's unique resonant field. A darkness at the edge, at his universe and its huge dominating galaxy appeared at the edge. A huge black star. Deeper than space. The abyss within the object linking with the star. Encompassing Savarna. Maybe she had found a way through, uniting the two fields negating conceptual reality. All the laws of the universe without meaningless. If Savarna clung to that she would be lost, dissipated, negated, vanished.

Savarna felt the nothingness expand within her. Feeling liberated from everything. The tenebrific fount and its radiant dark plasma of pure universal energy made her feel exuberant. Here was the centre feeling the depths of her unconscious awakening, herself now an expanding presence through numinous and theomorphic resonances that had pursued the laws of the universe at its very inception.

With the opening of her deep mind came phantoms of unknown hues which drifted through the pulsing immanence conjuring signal warnings almost graspable yet lithe and shapeless, distortions of a foggy mind devoid of substance. A fearsome nihilism brought forth the push of cyclonic winds, maelstroms of demonic dreams destroying antennal years of struggle, creating an inverse involution which threatened to stretch her mind to breaking point. But Savarna held on knowing these delusions came from her and

not the abyss. Still fear gripped its icy hands upon her and created the monsters she had to destroy with the aid of Kali and Shiva. She knew from her occult experiences that to dally here too long would only concretise this state into corporeal reality. Knowing she had to engage in this ancient legendary battle against these encumbrances which were unusually real. She struggled violently against the encrustations forming substantially about her.

Savarna grasped she had to act quickly for a sorcerous bourn was invading this obfuscated realm now sinisterly lit by an alien cloak of darkness which seemed impenetrable. It threatened to embrace the entire semblance of her abysmal world in which she felt to be such an infinitesimal part. A terrific and deadly ultra telluric danger. It was more than just a menacing radiance coming from lost gods sporting their recondite insanity. She clung to the hope of knowing her existence was still real. Behind this shape shifting delirium she glimpsed the dim outlines of domes and heathen temples, of spires and beatific palaces which grew in transpicious patterns about her.

The immortal city captivated and entranced her. Obviously she had broken through the abyss. Yet she had expected a heavenly empyrium and not this. Then again her presence felt like an eternity now. She saw the temple, the same she had seen elsewhere but could not remember. Then it came to her once more, to gain access to the centre, the secret within the abyss, the very found of creation, that of the gods and that of the universe itself.

She remembered crossing the desert but that was of no importance now. Concentrate. Still someone, or was it a dream had revealed an admonition relating to this temple which she sought and finally found. If she had been here before there could only be one reason for this: she was meant to be here. The logic might be circular yet it made

sense. Savarna knew she was regressing through her previous reincarnations, returning again and again to her gates of destiny. It was a good sign. Yet somewhere along the line a sage had told her not to linger in any state she found herself in. But then that could have been a trap so that this magus could keep the prize for himself. She headed for the temple.

Savarna heard the mysterious cry of memories almost forgotten. In the growing dulcet light one majestic building above all others glowed in a ruddier blaze. The reflected light flowed into her creating a wondrous sense of sorcerously beguiling enchantment. The mana caressed her creating within a deep desire to come and fathom its awesome mystery. With the light now being a part of her she failed to notice the decrepit and decaying landscape around her. Which the buildings fed upon. She ignored the wasted trees oozing a purulent deliquescent essence upon the ground leaving only a squelching corruption upon the soil as she pressed towards her goal.

In the temple precincts the priests, as she approached them erupted in lambent lights promising her revelations and countless enigmas. Lights meant the Devas, semi divine beings. She had arrived at the gates of eternity and would claim what was hers if she joined in their ineffable rites of passage.

Savarna ignored the sickening countryside, the rising excrescences, the primal sludge and primitive pulsating slime around the gilded city. Turning her back upon this strange aberrant nature, doom laden under a malevolent sky she entered the open courtyard and sacred precincts whence the marble reflected in nacreous light the bright pearly heavens above. This place must have been in former times the original nexus of the gods who had come to Earth to begin, to entrench and create the very first and most high of temples from whence all life had been auspicated. She had indeed arrived at the

centre where potent impregnating gods gathered to fashion life on this planet. She would soon be one with her own divinity.

As she followed the now familiar path past the gargantuan serpent guardians into the inner chamber she knew already the penultimate rituals whereby through this well practiced repetition a precisioned sorcery touched not just her consciousness into greater dimensions but also through moving backwards in time and moving backwards through her previous reincarnations she would, had to, in the end reach that finality where the birth of her very occult self would reunite with the birth of the gods themselves.

The opaquely glowing bodies of the reappearing priests showed her the way. They descended the spiral staircase and entered the sacred precincts where upon the centre of the floor was the mandala. They positioned themselves upon its cardinal points gesturing for her to take centre position. This was becoming easier for with each encounter, with each recurrent meeting at this temple the mandala seemed to draw her back again and again, spiralling ever closer to the point, the primal fount until finally she had come to the ultimate centre, the truth of her divine origin and the fulfilment of her quest.

As she assumed once more the lotus position within the core of the mandala a feeling of pure delectation overawed her stunned senses. She felt the ebullient nectar of the gods themselves coursing through their divine bodies. In the distance she heard incantations and fervent prayers. The sedate languor reminded her of things she should have known but somehow was beyond the recall of their current state of mind, so enticing and enrapturing was the teeming visual reality around her. For a moment the face of one of the four priests looked familiar, probably a memory of some future existence.

The four priests began to glow in a soft waving light. The merest breeze moved them in graceful motions revealing so Savarna thought their divine origins. Yet amongst the brightness, lesser things moved. The flaming bodies soon lost their semblance of humanity as the visions of antedated horror slowly pushed the flames aside. Mimicking life these abominations were still only images of what could become, later, real entities.

The temple seemed to have disappeared. She was in an open courtyard. The dark horrors had receded towards the horizon. She must have moved backwards in time before the temple had been built, before the arrival of the gods on Earth. She looked at her feet and her worst fears manifested themselves: the mandala was gone.

The ruins of the city were glowing, imbued with a strange misty light. The soft yellow glow began to change into a burnished coppery hue, the very walls crumbling around her. With the decay of ages impressing itself upon her the monstrous presence held at bay now started moving towards the vacuum left by this now desolate ruin of an edifice. Fiendish presences seemed to evolve about her in teeming multitudes. She felt caught in a dreadful womb of the most primitive forms of life. Here tarried the blind, groping, sucking, squelching, crawling, oozing, gnawing animated substances, the origins of life revealed at last.

The immemorial brute hood was more than just a psychotic delusion holding her in its hypnotised trance. She had indeed found the fount of life on this planet but she had not expected it to be so base. Such a blind grouping rheum suffuse with its purulent self same insensate ugliness. The sages, the mythologers, the priests had all lied then. Life was if anything but divine. So what had the city been then? A dark fusion of sentient stellar intelligences, creations of the now distant so called gods? Had they turned these amorphous slimy forms of crawling dumb life into the forms of later evolution then?



But it was all academic now. With the mandala gone she was well and truly trapped. This place might have been the original temple of the future as her mind perhaps conceived it. It might even have been the centre for the Turanians, Merduk and in her time Shuja. But with each repetitive spell she had been transported further back into musty time when life existed as no one would have dares suspect. And she was retrogressing into it surrounding primeval sludge.

She felt, sensed these lymphatic amoebic crawling expulsions which were more ancient than life evolutionary scientists had so far unearthed. And now it was slowly rising in a horrific tide of paludal loathing, engulfing the ruins, seeping into the streets and burying the broken foundations. She wished she could dissolve her consciousness and return to where ever she had come from. But the delirium was all too real.

Yet as the crawling mass of primal slime crawled through the remnants of the city Savarna noticed that this virtually empty necropolis was nothing but an image, a future reflection, a blueprint fluctuating with the emanations of newborn galaxies. Here the forming of sub atomic particles were impregnated with the radiate wavelengths, their primal energies being merely some distant resonance of things yet to come. The energies might be focussed here, this might be the centre for their future to manifest itself but as yet it was not.

Crawling forms, their thick blind heads grinning with hungry malice shaped a marauding ocean around her. This rising ordure, this life of gluttonous enmity seeking fresh nourishment. This rising muck began to lap delectably at her feet. Slimy secretions were moving towards her, eager feculent worms with their quivering proboscis scented fresh warm blooded flesh. With a desperate effort to reach higher ground she fell instead to earth. The reality of the remnant ruined building for that awful moment had been but a

semblance of electronic vibrations, atomic plans awaiting their material manifestation. The crawling sebaceous oddities drew her blood, the vermin began to nibble and devour her bleeding feet. She stumbled upon a mound still left above the reeking teeming apoplexy as the writhing forms leeches themselves upon her. Savarna by now saw nothing but a blooded struggling suppurating pulp, the knowledge of the disastrous trap slowly dawning upon her stricken mind already severed from her numbed consciousness. Her convulsing lesioned body was now nothing but a morbid infected disease ridden plague inhabited by hungry parasites, her gnawed and sucked out limbs and dangling intestines covered in a thick dank contagion. The incessant hungry worms of insistent life had won.

Merduk watched with fascination as the body of Savarna began to be covered with dark flecks. They hovered and wavered on her body in the darkness which cocooned her. Merduk sat there knowing what was about to happen was a strange symbiosis of what the mantle could do to someone who wanted to break its deadly embrace. He saw the nightmarish and ghoulish fiends pour literally from her mind and crawl over her body, engulfing Savarna in a seething tempest of harrowing corruption.

Realising what was happening Merduk made his move. He entered the mandala, the jump gate but had no need to find its centre. Being was enough for him. He concentrated on the image of the mandala, an abstraction of his mind etched deeply within right into his unconscious and thus absorbing its resonance. Savarna could stay where she was. Already the primal crawling sludge was burrowing itself into her and whilst the energies of the cordon were focussed upon her Merduk was free to pursue his own aims.

For one last moment he saw the remnants of Zohex's kingdom. Saw the citadel slowly collapse as titanic boulders cracked from the cliffs, shaking and destroying the very foundation of Vahnsin. Trembling the mountain collapsed, rocks cascading like dice down the rocky incline onto the seething plain below. As the earth tremors grew in intensity poisonous gases, sulphurous clouds and violent flames spewed forth illuminating the smoke which darkening the sky.

The zigurath held yet the outer buildings were already a smoking heap of ruins. Then slowly the walls of the main temple peeled away leaving finally, when the dust eventually settled a rough hewn lesser mountain with a cavernous entrance. The lower temple with its inner chamber still intact.

Merduk shifted his gaze to Elburz. There amongst the valleys and mighty escarpments he saw the Turanians fall to the avenging might of their enemies. Every slain being was embraced by the outer abysmal horrors which devoured their life essences. The imbalance located right within, at the black star, of his home galaxy! Perpetuating the nightmare world of the Turanians but not on Earth. A subsumed reality within the orb which had extricated itself and...taken Zohex with it! The primal destruction removed from here but not annihilated. As long as that distant orb remained so did the threat of what Zohex had not been but had become. It was far from over. Hoping Regum's WebSpace might contain it. Seen from within the tablet's space it became imperative that the link with Earth through Regum was not severed. Otherwise that orb hanging as a vortex near the huge black star would resume its own insane dreams of worldly domination. Reducing Earth's sentients to the will of Zohex's dominant mania. There was much to be done.

### **Afghanistan**

“I am done here. That is the last of the intruders gone.” Shuja said as he looked up at Yehensho.

“There will be others.” He merely remarked.

“Yes.” Shuja admitted. “Let them try.”

Aware the Soviet's had buried one of the ancient temples. Shuja doubted they would find this one.

The psychic crafted mandala on the dais collapsed into itself and vanished.

"The Soviets have the tablet."

"Zohex's resonance. His artifice."

"So it appears."

Shuja unconcerned. No explanation as to any consequences.

"Where will you go?" Yehensho aware Shuja was not just a tribal leader.

"Find another location. Continue the work. What I have is within. The Soviets won't know what the artefact's potential really is. Machines read but they will not penetrate its secrets."

"Why not return with me to the Himalayas east of here. Where there is no war." Yehensho suggested.

"Thank you Yehensho. I have several locations in mind."

"You too? Excellent. Will you need...my help?"

"I will not forget you."

"And I will not seek you." Indicating that those places of power would remain inviolate.

"There are many on this planet. They do not all remain, some shift, drift, others decay and others manifest. Patterns have shifted over millennia. Some are overrun with people thus dampening their overall effects. Others, ignored, are gestating. So the continuity continues. You know yourself," pausing to gaze at Yehensho, "that it really is in the mind. A sort of inner map not unlike that of your Buddhist friends. You probably have guessed that I am building up a map of this planet's hidden locations. When I am

done I will know from whence this energy comes. I know it is not here but somewhere amongst distant stars. Something we both share...”

Yehensho merely nodded. They both connected. Each recognising in the other that neither were human. Then they laughed. A delicious moment to be savoured.

The muffled drone of the gunships became persistently louder. They heard the muted sounds of exploding rockets and the staccato pounding of machine gun fire. They waited for the violence to abate, the shuddering vibrations to cease.

“You know this chamber has to cease attracting those who’s aims are obscured by ignorance and hubris.”

“Yes Shuja, I know.”

Near the entrance to the ancient ruined temple they placed semtek charges. Unrolled the wires and after climbing the small ridge pressed the detonators. Several small clouds of dust billowed out of the entrance, the explosion muffled, then came the sound of collapsing rubble. They returned to inspect their work. The main entrance to the inner chamber was sealed. With the westerners liquidated, the others sent back the secret of this chamber would be safe for now. Ghuri’s men would make sure no stranger rediscovered this distant place.

In the distance they heard the angry fires of war.

“It will be a long struggle.” Shuja said resignedly.

“And one that can be won. You’re people have never been conquered yet.”

“Will you return one day?”

“Not here unless you call.”

“May Allah protect you Yehensho.”

“And you.”

They looked at each other wondering who would return first to their home planet.

“Is your brief over?” Shuja asked.

“I can reveal this much. I am a scout.” Not revealing exactly what he was scouting. For Shuja it was enough.

“And I will remain for a while to see what the Soviets will make of the artefact. Somehow I don’t think they are ready though...perhaps in a few decades. The scientists here are edging closer...” leaving unsaid as to what. Yehensho understood. The secrets of the quantum universe. Shuja probably a guide, a possible advisor or an emissary when the time was right.

The potential of the future beckoned them both.

The climbed out of the valley and said their farewells.

### **Vahnsin**

Merduk surveyed the empty shell of Zohex’s citadel. The mighty fortress, so recently the scourge vanquishing all into abhorrent submission was desolate, utterly so. The immense and massive walls, the overshadowing parapets and observation towers seemed nothing but a desolate misbegotten ruin. He was standing at the entrance of the feared temple complex, its serpent guardians crumbed in a pile of stone, the life force animating the bestial religion depleted with the collapse of Zohex’s containment field.

Merduk almost felt normal. His mind was clearer, a weight lifted, his extrasensory capabilities enhanced. A change of reality more aligned to Earth's later history. Negating the nightmare world of the Turanians. Zohex's depleted resonance weaker across time itself..

All Primaians he knew were psychic to some degree but Zohex obviously had created interference waves subduing his potential. That, he considered made Zohex something other. Part Primaian and part what? The thought frightened him as he stepped around the ruins. Zohex's history was solid, or had been. His current status, dead, contained in a potent field, relegated as in being disposed of his psychic abilities wandering mentally destitute or extracted by the incoming light field which Merduk senses a connection. A tenuous incursion of Regum once they saw that Zohex was out of control. Thwarting Prima's efforts to align Earthers to themselves. Tuning this planet's resonance to theirs. Which did not mean Zohex had been deleted. Even that concept carried an inane worry. Whether Zohex was a construct. Such as the persona's who inhabited Regum's WebSpace. Had Prima tried to duplicate such a web here with Zohex it's potent vortex. Answers which lay in the future. No. The present! All the time! The realm whence Zohex originated. The Simulacrum his own construct! Zohex reaching from the future into this and other presences, multi realities to which he had access. This being just one. The orb a retraction device, pure code, pure light, pure data.

Merduk then trespassed into the orb wherein lay the kernel, the Cyber Intelligence that projected Zohex, who, under overbearing forces, data loaded virtual probability waves inimical to him, which gave Merduk the moment to activate a future of Earth more conducive to Regum's resonance. Going against Prima's intentions. Having become a traitor and a heretic. His shaky belief in a unitary god, after seeing what Ahriman could



do to Earthers, what the Cosmic Consciousness had done to Primaians to even consider the fate Zohex envisaged to become real history on Earth he found utterly abhorrent.

Was there a potential struggle destined further along time? One this world if it was to maintain its freedom had to win. To become self dominant here so as not to be subverted by Prima. The audacity of his home planet disturbing. The power of this planet had been twisted by Zohex beyond all natural proportion. Infected by localised occult forces, a contaminated field with many sentient sources, psychotic and homicidal by nature which the Primaians were correct in adjusting. A race such as this, as they had been, if ever expanding into space was a nightmare in itself. An entity such as Zohex with his increasing unstable mind had created the image of a mono theistic deity in the form of Ahriman. That psychic entity in itself prone to madness. His extracting a future more aligned to Regum so that such a thought process, inimical to life could never embed itself into the souls of these people. Yet Zohex's data rich probability waves, collapsing into actualities in his future still allowed the combination of exultant domination...not unlike Prima! Reality on Earth dual tracked. This was getting worse by the moment. The battle had been won but whether there was a war to be decided in the future, one that entangled both Prima and Regum was born on an ill wind. Prima's primary ideology obsessed with the notion of a singular god. Here Merduk had seen just to what depths of iniquity such a thought process lead.

Merduk had no wish to see what remained of the temple. Savarna's mouldering corpse devoured by a wasting disease might make it unhealthy to be near. He climbed over fallen columns to the central chamber where Zohex had been last seen. It was then he heard the murmur like that of a distant ocean. Forceful yet restrained. Then he saw the lights, torches flickering in the day for some odd reason. To keep Ahriman god of

darkness at bay. With Zohex gone Merduk doubted Ahriman would return. Or that anybody in their sane mind would wish to resurrect this singular horror. Unless some of the surviving Turanians were retreating to make this their last bastion of defence.

Looking about the ruins there was not much to defend.

Walking through the rubble strewn courtyard surveying the colossal damage done to the overwhelming structure he sensed none of the malevolence by which Zohex had ruled. The place deserted even of the servants. Then he saw the first of the victorious renegades returning from the south. Not defeated but triumphant. Upon seeing Merduk their hatred flared once more into life. Eyes filled with venom they moved towards him. Since he was an insert through the collapsed probability waves, he was embedded physically into the world but not of this world. Nothing could touch him. Nor was it likely Zohex would return to a reality aligned more with Regum's WebSpace. Zohex voided, thus deleted. Triumphant in a constrained contained reality. When Zohex discovered he was truncated then the danger would once more remanifest. Until then Earth at least was free of his influence.

Merduk kept on walking towards the reception hall. Flies swarming over the wasted food and spilt wine. The renegades were fearsome in their hatred cloaked in daggers of lustful revenge towards him though they grudgingly held back.

And saw Kathan examining the ground looking no doubt for Zohex's corpse. And held the exuberant warriors in check. Restraining themselves with some difficulty. Some were pouring what wine was still left into goblets. Celebrating knowing the citadel and its abhorrent inhabitants were gone.

"About time." Was all Kathan said.

"Indeed." Merduk agreed.

“Is he dead though?” Looking for signs of Zohex’s demise.

“The gods have taken him.” It was a simpler answer than the probable truth. He was aware that they considered him just as guilty for centuries of calamities that had been visited upon them. Not realising that it had all sprung from Zohex’s mind. Or that of the then linked Deep Visionaries who themselves were aligned to what? Zohex’s own domain?

“You saw this?” Kathan’s eyes holding Merduk’s.

“You could say that. It was the light,” stepping around some sweetmeats, “which upon vanishing took Zohex. Called by the gods as I said.”

Angry whispers. Why would the gods want Zohex? Unless it was Ahriman. Merduk had no trouble reading their minds. But Ahriman was darkness so it had to be the Devas. Why would they want Zohex? To burn him in their celestial fires. That seemed to satisfy them for now.

So what to do with Merduk.

Who walked over to an upturned armchair, righted it and sat down. Indignant voices were appalled at Merduk’s disrespect in front of their spiritual leader. They had much to learn Merduk thought.

Kathan stood in front of Merduk who was unperturbed. Kathan watched him with mocking eyes, the renegades relishing the possible confrontation they knew they would win. It was then Merduk saw an opening.

“Where is the magician from another time?”

“So you knew.”

It was a surmise. Merduk had sensed the transition but thought nothing of it. Only that a person of power was staying behind. One who’s resonance was way beyond that of

the multitude. Independent, not seeking magicians to team up with, who had been present at Mudhan's murder. Which Merduk knew was a turning point. Instead he expanded upon what he knew.

"He was on the trail of Zohex." Without saying that Zohex could be in more places than just one. That he had waited in the future prior to his arrival. That meant he knew everything that was going to happen here. Perhaps to change the course of history to become dominant here, on behalf of Prima's orders. And had failed. This time.

"From another time." Kathan repeated.

"That is where Zohex hid after the fall of Tellurium." Attracting thus Bahnum's attention. Then followed him here. "To start anew here." He said simply.

"But he is gone." Kathan not too certain.

"Gone yes. But I am beginning to fear not vanquished."

"If the Devas have him then he is finished. The light alone, the celestial fires..."

"Yes. So it appeared."

"You doubt it?" The renegades perturbed not just that Zohex might have escaped but that Kathan was treating Merduk almost as an equal. Well they needed information so it was politic to approach Merduk with some circumspection.

"I do."

"Certain?"

"I fear he can be in more places at the same time. It might weaken him as has been shown here. Your superior forces collapsed his power. Quite a remarkable achievement."

“Yet you survived. Or were you abandoned? Or have you a plan inimical to us? You apparently were not absorbed by the light, of no interest to the Devas. The fiery element not destroying you.”

“Take a seat Kathan.” Merduk said, his voice leisurely. Taken a little aback at the strength and certainty emanating from him. One of his men offered Kathan a chair which he graciously accepted. Then the others ranged themselves around the two archimages.

“Speak then.”

“It is really very simple.” Merduk making himself comfortable. “In the far future an event occurred which my world thought initially a danger to our existence.”

“Namely?”

“First the meeting of two universes. Yours and ours.”

“I and others are aware of the multiplicity of different realms within the cosmos. Go on.”

“The problem, for us anyway was that your energy fields, your life force is a threat to not just us but all life in the universe. For us your world, your people constitute a deadly threat.”

“How so? Life might be engaged in a life and death struggle but that does not constitute a threat as you put it.” Comprehending Merduk’s concern.

“Not evil.” Even though it was. “Just dangerous. It’s this planet’s overall resonance. Dripping with homicidal madness. Not just now but even millennia from now. This resonance has reached us. It threatens the stability of our planet’s resonance. So Zohex was sent to align your minds to ours. In that he failed. Something went wrong. I think Zohex has been infected by exactly that he had come to align. I am a mere observer.”

“That cannot be.”

“It is a lie.” A renegade interrupted. Kathan waited for the outburst to subside.

“I assure you that is the case.” Merduk continued unperturbed.

“You were here to merely observe?”

“At first yes. But when Zohex became impossible I began to wonder at the methods employed by my race. It was then I figured that I could do nothing by myself.”

“So you intended to thwart Zohex?”

“Yes.” Well maybe. Once he had been recalled by the Reganians preferably. Yet they held back. Unless Prima had overridden them.

“Then why did you not kill him?”

Typical Earth.

“Impossible.” Zohex was a pure Insert. Merduk as well.

“?”

Merduk said nothing. Let Kathan dwell on that.

“So death cannot claim you.”

“We, I am an energy field.” Better not give too much away.

“But life is not for ever. Not for mortals.” Kathan feeling uncomfortable. Gods were gods but this Merduk, an archimage could be killed. It had been done before. Yet he claimed immortality without inferring a godlike status. “So that means Zohex continues.”

“When he wrapped his containment field,” let him make of that whatever he wanted, “over your reality he, like me, had no idea, “ not, “of the effect it would have upon him. The infection of your homicidal resonance we feared though was contained, broken whilst Zohex reigned supreme. But as you may have realised Kathan, the strange

psychic forces flowing through this planet was thereby unnaturally increased. Channelled into Ahriman. That Zohex continued this long was due to our alien magic. The field completed the psychic forces, grew in strength infecting even Zohex. As his power waxed so did the equilibrium become more unstable.” Pausing for Kathan to come to grips with their potential.

“Anyway,” Merduk continued almost resignedly, “so was your psychic life force. First in Tellurium, Moerdrum then Vahnsin.” Merduk trailed off. Prima was using the very psychosis they were trying to neutralise by aligned it with theirs which instead reversed itself here. Than a worse thought struck him. That just maybe this is really what they intended. Keep Earth in perpetual warfare. That would stop any peaceful expansion of knowledge and the sciences. And as a bonus reinforce the idea that Earthers were homicidal. Perhaps not even worthy of life.

“Yet you overcame all. Congratulations.”

“Without your help.” Kathan driving the point home.

“I was hoping Zohex would burn out within the field. Self destruct. But then I am not privy to what my superiors real intent is. I am an observer as I said. And I think this Bahnum Randa is a hero as well. He united your people...” Meaning they had not.

“Yes.” Shifting in his seat. “So what do you intend to do?”

Good question. Could he recall himself? The jump gate, of course, in the citadel’s ruins of the temple beneath the earth. If that was buried in the rubble then he was well and truly stuck here until Regum and or Prima sent another one. Yet in Tellurium they had simply appeared just in time. So what had gone wrong here? He felt dislocated.

“I would like to meet this person who crossed over. Bahnum Randa.”

“I think not.” Kathan smiled for the first time. “He married one of the Devas. He has decided to stay with us and help build a better future. But if you remain then at some future time...”

So they were not going to seek their revenge upon him. Though given the mood of the renegades that was not as yet certain.

“Yes, the future. It might be best to forget the past. You don’t want to resurrect that which has been destroyed.”

“What of the black mandala Zohex used?”

Grumbles all around. They knew.

“Oh that. Without Zohex it is nothing.” He hoped. For it was in alignment to his resonance. Unless someone could duplicate that it was of no worth. A historic trinket at best. He wondered if he could use it. They were from the same planet, shared to a degree the same resonance. He did not want them to know of the one in the ruins.

“We shall let you leave, on one or two conditions.”

“Kathan. You cannot touch me. Let one of your warriors throw a spear at me. It will merely bounce off me. I am an energy field in which I exist. So what are these conditions?”

“Not to let Zohex or any of his kind return. Because if your people do then there will be a time when we may come across to you.” Kathan threatened. The very thing Prima feared! There was no reason that in the future this might not occur. Interesting. That will give the Domain Lords something to think about. Leaving Earth alone.

“Then I would look foreword to meeting you.” Merduk disabusing him of being afraid of the threat.

“Since you are from the future, then what of ours?”



“Ah Khatan. If I were to tell you then it would not happen. For you would know and do nothing thinking it is destiny, or written in the stars. But by doing nothing other events would unfold. Another future realised.”

“I understand. Perhaps it is best if you were to leave.”

“You would let this liar, this traitor leave?” A renegade bursting indignantly at the effrontery of letting this criminal to them gain his freedom.

Kathan stood. “My warriors. Make your way to Elburz. Join in the festivities of our hard earned victory. Remember the fallen. I shall join you presently.”

The idea of celebrating outweighed their urge to avenge themselves on Merduk. He had been an instrument but not an instigator of Zohex’s madness and his cruelty. The gods had tested them and they had been victorious. It was enough. No more bloodshed.

As they left the ruined courtyard Kathan and Merduk made their way back to the temple’s remains. The once flaring serpents, the chiselled outline all that remained on the once horror invested entrance were no more. Buried in the rubble within. Mute witnesses to a discarded past.

“I had always wanted to see this place razed to the ground. But considering the evil it harboured I might just leave this fallen monument as a warning to future generations.”

“Yes. A monument to extreme folly. So you want to see me disappear? I might just take you with me.” Merduk chortled.

“I doubt that. I am not without power.”

Merduk did not want to enlighten Kathan of the differences in power. If he did cross accidentally at least he could return. He just hoped the jump gate would go active.

The inner entrance was still solid. They both climbed down its ancient stairs. The tablet had fallen off its dais. Merduk replaced it. Where was only important for the moment in that it was the last coordinates Regum would have read.

In place Merduk stepped upon it. Letting the intelligent machinery read his resonance. Once scanned the transfer could be initiated.

Kathan felt rather than heard a faint hum. The tablet, the jump gate was energising. Merduk thanked Regum's technological capabilities. The artefact started to resonate as it aligned with the quantum state of Merduk, that of his resonance. Quantum entanglement achieved the non locality localised, both gate and Merduk went fuzzy for some moments and then both vanished.

"Incoming probability wave." K announced. "Rerouted."

"From where?" Loara asked.

"Earth to Regum. With the lab off line auto search sequence locating nearest probable synchronistic data field. Here. Hold in stasis? It would take some energy and leave a signature wave." K explained.

"Potential threat scenario."

"None."

"Can you contain its mass?"

"Yes. Creating containment field. Done. Ready to receive."

"Do it." Loara wondering what her predecessors had been up to. Denied to Prima.

The non localised, quantum entangled omnidirectional matrix focussed jump gate enphased with K's containment field. The jumpgate with Merduk became a collapsing

probability wave once more. He found himself in a white room. Endless, horizonless, near infinity as intended.

“Shall I?” K asked Loara head of security of the SS 1<sup>st</sup> Virtual.

“Please. We don’t as yet know what it is. Sentient, symbiot, construct and artifice, cyber intelligent, RamScram diffusion device, or totally alien K.”

The computer agreed.

Merduk relieved he made it. But to where? The lab he had left on Regum had been cluttered with gear, cables, nodes, external devices, instruments, observation and insertion rooms. But this, this was...something else.

“Specify identity.” K began the laborious process of analysing the unannounced visitor. Being cautious. The SS 1V was supposed to be top secret. Only a handful of people in the universe knew its existence. So what was this entity? Time to find out.

## Napier

“The sacred land where Bahloo lives is in grave danger;” Bonelaya said solemnly. Concerned but not overly worried, yet.

The Bralgu slowed their dance, shifting shapes slowly coalescing into opaque forms resembling the human visage. Overhead the night sky sparkled with millions of stars all brought forth by the old woman whose magic made it all possible.

“Jalngura thinks he is in touch with one named Gertuk.” Bonelaya continued folding his black shiny bat wings about him. The Bralgu, the dancing spirits in the eternal land of the dead listened, the shimmering glow of their spirits resonant with the Dreamtime, crafting its eternity.

“You have warned Jalngura and he persists with the evil star god.” The Bralgu thought in unison.

“Jalngura thinks this Gertuk is a strong medicine man.”

“As indeed he is.” The lights flickered, the lambency quivering giving birth to new stars.

“Nooralie, the Great Spirit who created from chaos this universe is displeased.” The dancing spirits chanted. “You must chase the evil away as once an evil spirit woke you from your sleep when Nooralie avenged that deed.”

“And brought death into the world as his last act of creation.” Bonelaya’s bat spirit growing eager and restless. He was looking forward in dealing with the antagonist

Jalngura who once had imitated the spirits with his own magic and entered the sacred island of the dead. Then they let him live for he had done no evil.

“Even changing his name to that of a white man should have been alerted us to what he was on about.” The spirits flickered, hovering around the black bat spirit of Bonelaya.

“The sacred songs of the Pinja are desperate in warding off the enwebbing evil. I fear the wicked star spirit of Gertuk lives now on in Jalngura. The elders of the Pinja are not happy thinking Bahloo will take revenge upon them because Jalngura is listening to Gertuk. Many white and black men are now dead because of him.”

“Release the evil spirit from Jalngura so that his spirit may return to the Dreamtime as it is meant.”

One of the flickering flaming spirits wove its wave towards the black bat spirit. In its shimmering glow a small green light shone with piercing intensity and fell to the ground in front of Bonelaya.

“A stone of power from Nooralie.” It chanted.

“And a song of power...?”

“...can be fought with another song of power. The stone is sufficient.” The spirit waveringly sang. The incandescent living apparition returned to its dancing kin.

The audience was over.

Bonelaya spread his wings and flew south.

With the awesome resonance of the whirring bullroarer Jacko’s spirit flew to the dark land above the stars. The monstrous building housing the spirit of Gertuk looked

desolate. Nothing stirred within its mighty walls. Yet Jacko sensed life, evil and corrupt. His heart leapt for joy. Gertuk had not forsaken him.

The courtyard was deserted. Some pack animals meandered amongst the litter strewn about. Everywhere emptiness. Many things were broken. He wafted through desolate corridors, his heart beating with unbridled anticipation. He had never been here before, never come this close. Finally having breached the mighty barrier between his world and that of Gertuk's. A feat in itself not easily accomplished by mere mortals.

Reaching a columned space, open to the sky he found many glittering objects thrown with a predetermined violence about the floor. Broken furniture, scattered spoiled rotten food, remains of puddles of wine but no Gertuk.

Jacko sat in wonderment amongst the ruins. Either Gertuk had defeated some enemy of his here or he had been defeated himself. He felt deep within his soul that something was missing, something had been ripped out, wiped off the face of the earth, dissipated in the Dreamtime to cosmic dust. A corruption oozed here, a seething invocation of deleterious hatred. His spirit balked at this malignant scene of the ruined citadel.

A bright star shone above him as if marking him out. His stricken soul depressed at the forlorn emptiness about him. Not even the spirits of the dead moved here. This realm was beyond evil. It was utterly devoid of everything. Its demented dreamtime an open wound upon the magical veil that transported the soul to the many worlds of the dancing spirits. There was really nothing here. Gertuk a fleeting memory.

The star grew tinier then as Jacko watched it, it vanished. With a jolt he realised he was back at the sacred site of the sleeping medicine man. His spirit elsewhere. Jacko was alone. Feeling a change in the night air. A shift of perspective. Lying flat on his

back. His hands empty, the bullroarer gone, fallen somewhere. He was without power. A powerful spirit near. He rose quickly still reeling from the horrid vision of Gertuk's ruined residence.

The image of the visiting spirit spread out before him. Bonelaya. In the centre of his head above his eyes shone a strong lime green light. Hitting Jacko between his eyes. Bonelaya content, holding this spirit captive, at the edge of death. And Jacko knew it. As was intended. Jacko paralysed with fear worse than what he had felt with this renegade spirit. Bonelaya having him firmly in his psychic grip.

Bonelaya transforming from human to that of his bat spirit. Unfolding his huge black lustrous leathery wings, an ebon aura surrounding his presence. The green light was painful burying itself deep in his bowels turning to water. Jacko felt the mad discordant clamour of frightened voices within his wrenched apart soul, fragmenting into miniscule pieces. His Dreamtime memory fractured into a mindless pulp of uncontrollable thoughts. For a moment he thought of Nooralie who had created out of chaos the universe. That chaos was now within him. The light seemed to sear his memory to tatters as the invasive spirit gained his soul. Then the light ceased.

Bonelaya had extracted and dispersed the evil spirit and its world from Jalngura who felt normal once more. Something had receded, then faded then vanished from within him. Vague images went blurry taking their evil essence with them. Dissipated in the wind like smoke. Whatever had been was no more.

He looked perchance at the sleeping medicine man. Encased in unremittent death. His soul too had moved on to the birth of its creation. He would dream no more.

His wings spread, Bonelaya took off into the warm pleasant night sky.

The moment Martin lifted his Yamaha 100 trailbike over the paddock gate feelings of guilt assailed him. The estate agent whom he had seen was reluctant to grant permission for him to enter the property. Martin had spun a story about his past connection with the place, trying to trace Jacko, their old stock hand. No one had seen Jacko for some time. Another disappearance. The agent told him he would need permission from the new owners, the elders of the Pinja. That could take weeks. So Martin went anyway. It would be his last visit.

He rode past the deserted farmstead already partly vandalised. There were holes in the fibro walls, planks uprooted from the veranda, sheet metal missing from the roof. The place looked and felt derelict. The silence oppressive. He rode on towards the Bahloo bend of the river.

Sitting there having a cigarette Martin could not help but feel, shooing flies away that the place still ought to be the same. But it was not, it was different. The whole area felt empty without Jacko. Whatever he had been, whatever his soul had been, he had taken something with him. For Martin the past was a closed book. There was nothing here anymore. Still, the idea that Jacko had vanished did not make any sense. Unless he had returned to the Pinja over beyond the ridge where the Cradle lay. The area where the aborigines had retreated until now.

He thought of the Reeveby's, Dr Parry, that German, Roger, the anthropologists all victims of something so bizarre it had killed them. No wonder there were those who were wary of this place. Yet to him it did not seem inimical at all. In fact, if anything it was pleasant, quiet, even relaxing. Remembering the quartz stone he had obtained, or found. The vision almost forgotten. Maybe it did protect him. He felt for it in his jeans.



He had enough stuff now to finish his thesis. If Downing agreed. Maybe it was a little too unreal for academia.

It was getting hot and hotter. Maybe having been in the northern hemisphere made the temperature difference harder to bear. He felt he was in a cauldron, the air heavy. Almost physical. No breeze. But the heat was dry. He rose to get back on his bike.

It was then he saw the dark shapes some distance away across the meandering river. Watching him. The Pinja. Feeling apprehensive. He knew he shouldn't be here even if looking for Jacko.

There were six of them. In the heat haze they looked like wavering illusions with no distinguishing features. No cloth, no colours, no weapons just their dark silhouettes. Moving closer, hovering over the ground rather than walking. Martin rooted.

"Looking for Jacko." He blurted out. Only the whites of their eyes distinguished anything about them.

Martin felt light headed, the heat incredibly intense. Were they engaged in some enigmatic rite? He hoped not. They did not take kindly to having their ceremonies disturbed.

Hearing their chant. Slow, rhythmic, gentle. The refrain ebbed and flowed around him, weaving a languid resonance within him. Sensed more than merely heard. Singing specifically to him.

A death song? Another vanishing? There was nothing to do but wait. So he waited. Expectantly. He knew nothing of their Dreamtime except it existed to them.

The chant pleasantly beguiling. He certainly did not feel threatened. Feeling rather good, great. Martin wanted to sing himself. This was getting weird. Hearing the

drone above him. That was him, out of key, humming with them. Was he going to unite with them and pass over? Leave the land of the living? Was this an NDE?

The bright yellow hills, the dark shivering gumtrees, the wavering heat, the dark shapes remained in place.

'Jalngura sleeps guarding this sacred ground.' He heard in his head. Not sure who was doing the projection.

'Jalngura?' Martin thought stupidly. 'Jacko. An old friend from long ago.'

They understood. It made him happy.

'We are free now.'

'So the land is yours. What Jacko, I mean Jalngura wanted.'

'No. We knew what he wanted for himself. He had travelled with souls to the land of the dead. That is forbidden. But he was strong, he had help so he got away with it. An evil spirit beyond the stars. Wanting to enslave us. Even the white man. But Gertuk is defeated and Jalngura sleeps now by our strong magic. The Pinja can now live in peace.'

'I thought the Pinja were behind this with Jalngura.'

'No. It has taken us years to stop him. Years of secret corroborees to finally banish his evil spirit.'

And here he thought Jacko'd been his friend. Totally conned.

They wavered around him, dancing now, chanting, circling upon themselves, in measured motion, wavering to their chant, slowing down, metamorphosing, dissipating.

A cool breeze shook Martin out of his hazy trance. He saw the river and the pines near it.

His soul at rest.

Now how to incorporate this into his thesis.

‘Don’t.’

**Sumtek Monastery, Nepal**

Abbot Vajpasana was giving a lecture in the open, outside the imposing edifice of the monastery. The air was clear, the breeze refreshing, the sun shimmering amongst the surrounding plane trees, the majestic snow covered Himalayas sparkling in the sun. He was giving a discourse to the assembled monks on the inner strength of the soul to overcome all obstacles. Those around him sitting like him in lotus repose listened attentively. Some discomfited by insects enjoying the feast spread out in the warmth before them. Vajpasana aware of their plight admonished them saying they had no chance to cope with their Bardo state when transmuting into their next reincarnation of these little mites were distracting them at this moment. With that timely reminder that the need of mindful concentration was everything, he closed the discourse.

The monks rose slowly, paid their respectful obeisance and left with the abbot's permission before returning to their various duties to ponder his message. It was only then he noticed the grey clothed garb of one of his listeners, flanked by the dark brown orange of his companion.

"Abbot you sneak." Vajpasana beamed at his old friend. "How long have you been here then?"

Vajra Padma walked slowly his friend following towards his equal, bowed slightly and wished him celestial happiness.

"You certainly know your stuff." Hinting at how he had mingled amongst the orange monks and not stood out.

"My coming here without your knowing? I still have a few skills." He beamed.

"Still playing your shaman tricks."

"Me?" he said innocently. "It is good to retain some things."

"Like cloaking yourself with one's environment?"

His friend merely acknowledged the compliment with a benign smile. “Your lecture was to the point as usual. I liked your little finale regarding the annoying gnats. You are right of course. If these little buggers disturb our equilibrium then what chance for enlightenment.” He chuckled. Smacking one of them on his arm. Not unduly worried considering he had released a soul from its rather limited life.

The one in grey hung back. Letting the two abbots reacquaint each other.

“You wish for some tea no doubt.”

“It will be a pleasure.”

They ambled slowly towards the three storey building.

“To what pleasure do I owe this visit then?”

“Well, there is someone I wish you to meet.”

Vajpasana was indeed curious. From the dispersed monks the grey clad figure, bald, distant grey eyes moved towards the two men.

“Allow me to introduce to you Yehensho.”

Yehensho bowed. He was carrying something draped in sturdy linen.

“May the blessings of the Buddha be with you.”

“May celestial enlightenment guide you on your holy path to nirvana.” Yehensho replied. He would need it for what was coming.

“Thank you. I think we shall take tea in the courtyard. It is a delightful day after all.” Vajpasana suggested.

“An excellent idea.” Padma replied.

Vajpasana called out to one of the monks milling about and asked him to serve green tea for three under his favourite tree. There were several chairs to choose from.

Having seated themselves around a small table, in the tree's shade they sat for some moments in silence, enjoying the serenity of the place. The designated monk returned with the tray of tea, set it upon the table, bowed and left.

They sipped the hot liquid feeling at ease.

'Not for long.' Yehensho mused.

"Now Vajra, what intelligence do you wish to impart that you have come here so surreptitiously?" Vajpasana asked.

His friend let out a sigh.

"I will be brief." Returning the cup to the table. "My brave bombo, Bahnum Randa has not returned. One could say the mandala has swallowed him just like our renegade rinpoche. We pray for them naturally but I think neither intend to return."

Silence.

"We could, like Vishnu enter Rasatal, Hell that is and try and retrieve either souls and body. But it may be that both wish to remain for a while." Without elucidating other, less favourable possibilities. "There is only one way of knowing and frankly I am not curious."

Yehensho waited.

"That is that then?"

"For now."

"But there is something else. I can almost read it." Vajpasana chuckled.

"The coming darkness."

'At last.' Thought Yehensho.

Vajpasana merely nodded. Yehensho watching both of them.

“Well, I have been thinking. Now that you mention it. This darkness is distant though approaching. Way beyond the stars. So here is what I think. We are in the age of Kali Yuga, the Age of Iron. The darkness its fulfilment.”

“Destined.” His visitor remarked.

‘Programmed.’ Yehensho smiled.

“Maybe it’s negation?” Vajspasana wondered.

“Through our mandalas.” Padma feeling perky.

“I think this darkness is the centre of the mandala that is the Kali Yuga. And when it centre is upon us...”

‘We shall take over.’ Yehensho relishing the process set in motion.

“If tradition is truth, demons and Buddhas will struggle for supremacy. An age of Chaos awaits us.”

‘Riding the information rich probability waves to manifest the programmed future.’ Yehensho filling in mentally what these two abbots were concerned with.

“A time of trouble?” Padma really not asking.

“A calamity where only the balanced mindfulness will survive.”

‘That much is true. But these adjusted sentients will be in the minority. As expected.’

“The centre of chaos, of the abyss.” Yehensho breaking their thoughts, “But I have brought something that may facilitate the transition.” And unwrapped the oblong object he had on him. Vajpasana merely looked at it as did Padma. It was a mandala.

“A gift.” He merely said.

Vajpasana was delighted.

“Thank you. Did you...?”

`Ah crunch time. Yes and no. Those behind me, specially tailored for the mindset on Earth. Aligning their sentience once the chaotic abyss in place on Earth. With its potent quantum enphased resonance it would dominate the planet's resonant envelope. The Earthers would never know they had been aligned. Their sentience, a possible threat to his planet obviated.

“With the help of some very dedicated monks.” It was close enough to the truth. “I am a mere vehicle.” Yehensho being humble. `More a facilitator.’

“Did you ever find the mandala that was taken from here?” Vajpasana asked. The tea was drinkable now.

“I traced it across India, Pakistan right into northern Afghanistan. The westerners had it.”

“What happened to them?”

“They got blown away.” Yehensho said neutrally.

“May they be in a blessed state of transcendence.” Pradma interjected. Yehensho let it pass.

“Then the Soviets came, guns blazing. I was not going to...”

“I understand Yehensho. We already have another.”

“Thank you. The Soviets probably have it.”

“Tell me, Padma. You too Yehensho if you know. How long for the darkness to reach us?”.

“”Knowing nothing travels faster than light, or so the scientists tell us it certainly won't be in our lifetime abbot.” Padma happy to know something of astrophysics.

“Then we have plenty of time to study the changes.” Vajpasana looking forward to the challenge.



Yehensho let them do the talking. They would never know the actuality of the process which would mass direct their total consciousness on this planet. The phase state of space was already beginning to waver, to realign. Knowing quantum processes it could be several hundred light years, a few thousands or with quantum entanglement at this end embedded in this mandala, maybe tomorrow.

Nothing though could stop the process.

**Moscow**

### **Appendix 1: Black Magic**

Eyes: KGB DIR /Androponov

Re: 3<sup>rd</sup> Directorate, Central Asia, 79-80

Ref: 000-CD aKab Ter Mos 0015/15-80

Ops. Balkh, H & LG ONLY

Dist: KGB & GRU Liaison Offs, rep ops QB

TL continuous

The partial elimination of Col Dubrov's 13<sup>th</sup> Signal Corps and Col Bakhst support unit [11-12/15/80] leaves no doubt about continuing bandit activity despite chemical saturation of designated area.

Enforcement at [Balkh, QB] fortress as rallying point indicates feudal ideology vis a vis BM success re above.

Continuing criminal activity.

Informants 3846, 7439 report tablet/artefact to belong to terrorists at Balkh. Believed to be holy relic stemming from pre-Islamic times.

Semenov [1-3/15/80] drew attention to QB with possible rebel manipulation of destabilising status quo including parapsychological impact and subsequent intrusion of human resonance/brainwaves/em spectrum.

Col D & B investigated said intel in security area 000 3790. Ambushed & Bakhst murdered. Col D severe mental trauma, condition serious. Suspects regarded same as bandit ambush Peshawar re: murder of Semenov and ops 3859 & 2357.

After consultation with H, LG, PB, DF & DM, Spetznatz anti-armoury and robotics division cleared site with remote controlled bomb[s] defusing robots. Fortress relieved of the artefact [000-3790-1] sealed hermetically, airfreighted to security area 000-0077. Analysis under Dr Z with appropriate clearance.

Limited atomic shelling levelled fortress at QB sanitising area of bandits. Counter insurgency null status.

Dr Z to complete initial tests. Findings follow.

Future states re: BM tbd.

End message.

### **Remote location, classified, USSR**

Colonel Dubrov was non aligned with this world. Barely aware of being in the military mental hospital, secure wing, isolation ward where he was under observation for acute mental trauma. In deepest Siberia so as to not attract too much attention.

His gaze more inward than outward. Plagued by shadows threatening his annihilation. Yet they let him live. These complex shapes, manifestations of an absence of substance if not life drew a subtle though dense veil around him. Circumscribing him. He was in there. After trespassing into it.

Trapped in an ebon interphasing interface between what was, which he could not quite remember and that which was almost to be, from which he shuddered and recoiled. Anything but that. A field existing out there amongst the stars, lost in time, prior time itself. The shapes guardians of a power antecedent with the creation of the universe. Concomitant. Which he had stumbled upon not remembering the how or the when. The deed done. Harbingers, alien, impregnating him with their resonance. Twisting his mind.

Urging something fearful and immensely potent upon him. He the sacrifice and the vehicle. Frantic panic brought the whites who calmed him with a jab of the needle. It did not remove the ethereal entities. Merely reduced their hold on his mind. Their latent impressions still penetrating his very being. With the promise of something even worse beyond their capabilities: to warp reality, warp space, warp time. Future nightmares from ancient dreams. Surrounded by a loneliness and an alienation as eternal space threatened to crush everything asunder with future nightmares from ancient dreams.

The lightless beings in latent statuesque vibrations revealing a chaos from whence sprung unearthly evolved revulsions anchored in their thought. They the carrier waves, human thought the receiver of cretinous abominations. A present and real danger hovering just beyond the grasp of consciousness.

Energised by a violent vortex irradiating the universe and thus Earth. An insane matrix of astronomical proportions at the edge of a monstrous black star in the centre of an immense galaxy. Where an orb hovered, the fount of this leeching mentally wrecking invasion. From whence they derived their essence. Weaving the trap around him, solidifying with each breath into an unyielding encasement of his stricken mind.

A creature in the centre, its humanoid cloak deception. Dubrov's mind hostile, feeling revulsion, as if it mattered. Trying to use the matrix to escape into a lesser hell. Maybe if he accepted his fate...it would relent.

The tension subsided, the brainstorm receded, calmness caressing him. The infinite darkness removed by one degree of order. Within the potent sphere where this shapeshifting alien hovered Dubrov was not denied the madness swirling now at a distance. Like a multitude of simultaneous television screens assailing his overloaded screaming senses.

Then he understood. The entity offered him...what? Madness? To weaken the enemy. Who? The Afghanis? Mocking laughter. Possible possession of vast power of any realm of his choosing. The change instantaneous.

He was Colonel Dubrov of the Third Directorate. Squinting at the adumbration so humanesque. The teeming screens, all worlds of their own, withdrew so that all he saw was the curvature around him. Geometric yet abstract. He felt he was breathing again. The offer stood. Be one of the chosen few. He was about to move forward only to...

...find himself immobile. The limbs straining against restraints. Buckled to a bed. How odd. The shadows moved back as if making way for...the ones in white. A human voice. But was it? Slow garbled guttural animal sounds. Another hell, on Earth. Best not to interact. Maybe he was in a foreign country, abducted after, after, after...what? Flayed corpses being sliced and cut to ribbons. His men!

The confrontation, the revelation. So that is what the whites were after. With every shot the madness got worse with the alien adumbrations and the distant realm of their issuance coming closer. The whites wanted him unhinged. He knew the method. A

dangerous mind needed a dangerous response. With plausible denial. By keeping him in a state of insanity his revelations would be discounted as the ravings of an unhinged mind. To bury what he knew in oceans of madness.

He decided next time he would cross over. He had nothing to lose.

Remembering thinking in his sleep. Wide awake eyes shut brain whirling along. Welcoming the shapes of and in the dark. Ambassadors of redemption. What did the whites fear? The coming!

Captive. Searing his brain trying to dissolve with some mental acid what he knew. The ingress in Afghanistan a response not an attack. Defensive not offensive. The adumbration within the sphere near the huge black star knew prior they did their future intentions. And being rejected. Dubrov had never considered this geopolitically. They were unworthy of this knowledge, this potential power source, these gateways to more than one future. If accepted take your pick. The one's his master had chosen inimical to that of the alien essence forming itself into his human aspects. A life form with that capability, with such mind boggling technology at hand had to be embraced.

Another jab. Scorching his brain as mother Russia scorched the Earth when retreating in front of an invader. Dubrov the battlefield. But the fires never came. Instead a thickness slowing his mental capabilities. Reversing the procedure. The shapeshifters were more distant, less substantive, the matrix further out of mental reach. In fact what had caused the nightmare was not that but the whites.

Blocking his neurones with theta waves. Followed by chemical warfare once more. But now it felt more stage managed. Inhibitors ascendant. Implanting molecular suppressors in his cerebral cortex. Anything was possible. Both ends. He had to get back to the distant matrix. Now a mere memory.

A man in white garbled something at him. His reaction voluntary, dribbling trivia, all irrelevant. By intent. Digging away. Dubrov recognising his interviewee stuck in an evolutionary quagmire. He would never understand. Both stuck in a rut. He through his mental inertia Dubrov through chemical disequilibrium. Like a pinball with no directional flippers.

Languid and smooth.

The straps were undone, his arms flopping down. He could barely feel his feet. Not caring either way. Knowing he could break through the barrier was enough for now. Yet they feared him and what he knew. He saw it in their eyes. Either as blocks of granite, colder than ice or a fervent urge bordering on the maniacal to keep him locked out. They knew something but not what. The support staff with nervous glances watching his every move. Ready to pounce.

Escorted by a group of jittery rabbits dressed in white gowns, thinking themselves fully functional humans. Enclosed in this warren of corridors and blank doors they were trapped at an even deeper level than he was. His mind could get him out, theirs could not. Even if that were possible for them they were too frightened to make the transition happen. The whole complex building a maze as he was transferred from bed to laboratory to bed to laboratory to more tests when he subdued his mind no matter what molecular mayhem was pumped into him. That to them was puzzling. When expecting him to freak out, when they dumped macro doses of lysergic acid into him he cruised in the stratosphere of his mind. They were trying to discover what had happened back in the cave. Going so far as to blame him claiming he had gone bezerk in there. Convinced he was insane. If he was indeed that then they were flatlining braindead non entities. Mere animations with not much going in headwise. Flatbrained.

A soft white room this time. My they were being concerned. And as expected the floor spongy white, with some stains remaining, interesting patterns, padded walls as if he were on some outsized sofa and a sound absorbing ceiling looking like someone had glued on egg cartons. In white. At the edge of the wall under the ceiling white fluorescent strip lights. Bundled in his strait jacket they undid the straps and made the quickest exit he had ever seen.

It was good to move his limbs. The sensation of touch slowly returning. His brain though was like a thick liquid in a sludge tank. The feeling not that unpleasant.

Sometime later, there was no window, one of them asked about the design. He must have been rambling unless they had made it up. Trying to find their way into both his head and that distant multi dimensional reality construct from whence the attack originated. Without touching him. He was being conserved, preserved, embedded at times.

Time to humour them. Since he was over the edge it did not matter what he said. So far he had kept to vague embellishments. In the end, he knew they could resort to less pleasant methods. Given what the humanesque alien did do it might be time for them to get acquainted. He relished the thought. And the possible consequences.

So he talked about a unified field beyond the edge of this universe.

“This?” The doctor looking up, sitting at a distance whilst he was back in his strait jacket, two oversized goons with shiny syringes ready to pounce.

“Yes, this. You think this is the only one?” like talking to a retard. “Draws its power from space itself.”

“From space?” worse than a retard.



“From where else? The ether is all potential. The trick is extracting what you want. Energy is easy. It doesn’t have to be localised. Just suck it and see.”

The other simply nodded. Scribbling away. Then his mind went blank. Crowded with confusion, delusions ebbing and flowing, followed by misunderstandings for Dubrov knew this doctor had not the depths of comprehension to even vaguely conceive what he knew was real, out there. Then his thoughts fragmented, splintered, being jostled like clothes in a washing machine. The centre inaccessible. The molecular mayhem he had to contend with.

Realising they were entangled in their own mentally cast web deforming, no limiting this reality. Trying to align him back from whence he had been. Too late. He had ventured all the way. He was not coming back. Unless on his own terms. That idea alone kept him going, gave him hope.

Time passed. With no idea how long he was secluded in this white room, with no curtains, devastation...the song with those exact lyrics popping up just like that. He couldn’t remember the band. Western then. A while back. Unrelated memories of his life as lived by another soul.

The doctors as they referred to themselves weren’t really. Otherwise he wouldn’t be here. He’d be out there. Something they could not allow. Barely comprehending their guttural slurring melodic at times sentences. The conversation beginning to get circular, looped, going loopy, the logic so basic as to be moronic. If he could adjust to their level, adjust he laughed to himself? Never. Too late comrade. Then he might be allowed some freedom. So they admitted the fact of his removal. Afraid he would make contact with others such as himself? He’d think on it.

Hoping he had not expressed his thoughts out aloud.

The man in white left and the lights went out. As black as in the country with an overcast sky at night. The blackness so thick it was right in front of his eyes. Darker than the temple. There, now there the darkness contained things, life forms not even his nightmares could have conjured. Was that what they really wanted? The beasts of perdition? Frighten the shit out of their enemies?

The darkness remained muted. He expectant. The dark soothing, relaxing his mind, allowing it to float on a warm bath, feeling his strength return. His mind more sure of itself. The strangeness when the light was there now absent. Unseen things falling into place. The jigsaw puzzle of his mind more coherent. The matrix within the distant orb with its millions of variations of reality present conceptually. More like recalling his memory. Imagining himself there. Choosing his reality. And become master of his own domain.

Laughing at their idiocy. That warped distant space securely in his mind. With patience attainable. Which required time, and timing. He had plenty of time.

Feeling the ingress. Tentative. Not as a surge more like a percolator. A quantum drop here and there. Falling into place within his vast mind here and there. Constructing stress points across his own matrix. Being aligned by degrees. Then the light came on and like a tide going out the matrix with its tiny energetic vortices receded. Coming back during the black out.

The transformation real. Supersensory. Now the psychedelic drugs were merely minor boosters helping him acquire the necessary information nodes to align with that which floated between the massive black star and the bright centre of the galaxy. Partially crystallising here and there like snow flakes wide apart. More like dendrites growing outwards across his mental membrane, already in place. The process finally taking form.

For the first time he felt liberated, joyful, even happy. The doctors considering themselves successful in their treatment of him. Even though the doses were ramped up he lapped it all up. The mind benders. Mind blenders. He let the other realities pour out of him, out of mind only to be lost in translation.

He felt sustained. Something solid was growing within him. Denied to their stupid probing questions so far off the mark as to be ridiculous. And then he remembered. They might be from the 'Psychotronic Warfare Unit,' or 'Black Magic' itself. Well if they wanted magic he would give them magic. In the other orb, it too was still assembling the mind that controlled it was absent. He smiled and knew why. It had entered one of its alternative realities. Making sure its orientation, its mission was to manifest itself as it wanted, where it wanted it, when it wanted it. The how irrelevant.

One thing he did note was its expansion. As his secondary inner mind expanded so did the orbs tendrils of loaded, preconfigured modules, quanta of energy. So that was what it was doing and why it wasn't where he expected it to be. It was busy expanding as well. Focussed on one reality not all.

Was he being left out? Then the tendrils crackling across his tenuous membrane would not be assembling. Unless he had reserved the space vacated for him. Dubrov's Domain. The thought tickled him no end.

One night the darkness enveloped him completely. Dark upon dark. Feeling its pure unadulterated energy. All barriers gone even though his inner sphere was still incomplete. And then the pattern self assembled in a flash. He laughed, the image rather funny. Reminding him of the hair nets older women wore. He had one in his head. Now he was aligned. Time to embrace his destiny, his future. The sense of confinement vanished.

Now it was those in white who were shadowesque forms with less substance. Their inner energy mere candle power to what was driving him. He was linked. Nothing they could do about that.

Even their whiteness a mere shimmering curtain. He was feeling confident. Together. Well he was. The multidimensional WebMembrane complete enough to function at a low level of physical entanglement.

Stepping out of the barrier. Their confinement irrelevant. Nothing could stop him now. Should he make a show of his powers? No. He was not the type to preen himself in front of these nobodies. Let him become an enigma! Yes! Confuse them for a change.

The maze in which he found himself not that confusing.

He willed them to free him.

And they did. Smiling. So he congratulated them. Feeling like a third person, a minor extraction of his expanded persona. Talk about having a big head!

They even escorted him down the linear corridor. No more surprising corners, disturbing angles, distorting projections, dislocated obstructions of their demented design. Created by molecular madness: psychotropic drugs.

A familiar outline. The head captivator. He would try a little thought experiment as scientists would say when going way beyond accepted parameters. See what he would make of it. The other's brain patterning resonance easily discernable. For all of them. His a darker green, wavelike structures creating a gridlike projection. That's where he would insert, no make that resurrect his own nightmares.

Illuminating through black matter radiation a seething cauldron of impossible possibilities. Resurrected from his so accessible unconscious. He let his inner beasts

loose. Interesting. The human teetered, stood transfixed, mouth agape, dribbling, then Dubrov ceased the resonant state allowing it its own natural equilibrium.

The other gaped at Dubrov who was not done. He was not entirely free yet. He would offer the doctor up to the distant matrix, the glowing orb which contained the other being. It was a simple matter, almost quaint he was getting used to it, of inserted it as a solid light projection into this head doctors mind. His resonance distorted, flaring into a dark purple, convulsed with inner contortions. His life force, such as it was, writhing against this totally alien influx. Dubrov almost tasting the others' agony. Debasing through transformation his inner self in an implosion of corrupting decay. Energy going incoherent. Decoupling from this reality. Becoming non localised. Entropy rising.

The head doctor's limited mind went mute, began to fade into an opaque void and was absorbed by the distant pulsing energy centre, its sub reality devoid of any life. Good enough for Dubrov. This white fell down.

At one with the unified field. Having chosen his reality.

Walking out of the white labyrinthine containment matrix, the military mental hospital for the criminally insane into the open world.

So much sky, so much space, so much potential.

It felt great.

## **Moscow**

**Beyond Top Secret.**

**Classification: Black Magik**

**S: Z**

**Appendix 2. [n.d.]**

Dear Yuri,

I hope you and your family are in good health and that you all enjoyed yourselves at the Olympic festival. It must have kept you busy or did you make your deputy do some work for a change? I am sorry I could not come to Moscow.

It is the present you sent me from Afghanistan which is keeping me occupied to say the least. I have virtually dropped, for a while, all other projects. For this reason I am taking the liberty of writing to you direct in your other capacity because facts have come to light which may have serious and far reaching consequences. Not just for the institute but our country. I am not being melodramatic.

No doubt you are familiar with the institute's closed findings, a concise summary which I have included in this letter. The impact our analysis will have upon the future of science gained from our work upon the Artefact, the Tablet will be enormous. Even what little we have gleaned already indicates a revolutionary breakthrough. Praised be dialectic

materialism! Somehow the Tablet manages to shatter our conceptual data of our present knowledge of scientific laws, even those of para- and normal psychology. This is not an exercise in self indulgent hyperbole. It is the reason for reporting this to you directly.

Without belabouring the point, in science it is both necessary and important for any working hypothesis to be able to be verified. In this way the theory can be retested and duplicated under laboratory conditions. The subsequent correlations of any prescribed phenomena should then by rights fit the facts. [Note: Science does not make the facts fit the theory, that my friend is the privilege of politicians!]

Naturally we had to backtrack to our departed comrade Prof. Semenov. He had written to me several times last year but I had been too busy [and am even more now] to ponder the fringe science he was then exploring. In fact I decided to ignore what I thought were mere idle ramblings. He seemed to be less objective in his orientation than science would permit, carrying out his work without the precise methodologies and logical hypothesis so necessary as a constructural tool to lay claim to sound deductive reasoning. But after we built upon our own results I find his notes had gained in validity. They have also aided me to come to some very difficult conclusions which concern this tablet.

To fully appreciate these conclusions I will have to describe graphically what are essentially only abstract mathematical formulae necessary to verify the reality and the actual pattern of behaviour of this object, both in time and in space. Because through some quirk of the Tablet, especially in regard to its intent NORMAL TIME AND SPACE DO NOT CORRELATE OR INTERCISE [WITH] THE TABLET. It seems to operate or exist outside the normal space time continuum.

As the institute report states the material and its composition are utterly unknown to us. Its constituent parts once broken down into the relevant atomic equivalents should correlate with a specific and equivalent field based on the usual atomic weight of the object. I will come to this presently.

Now every object is a field of force. And this field warps space via gravity which lends form to space. Electrons constitute themselves as wave properties in relative space forming the physical objects we perceive. .

It is a truism to say that every object does not exist in isolation [it only appears so to our limited sense apparatuses] . However the relations between objects are dependent upon its constituent fields which are interdependent upon gravity – a weak force – and the later discovered events of hyperspace – a strong force. What happens is this:

Over long distances the attractive force is weak and over short distances the repulsive force is strong. There is no real exception to this rule except for black holes. Our whole universe is based and works upon this simple recognition of this basic premise. Gravity, over astronomical units is weak, hyperspace over atomic units is strong [recap].

Gravity [attraction] although in itself a weak force is very strong on Earth. We know this from launching missiles. At the other extreme towards the limits of the known universe we have the occurrence whereby whole galaxies cannot escape from the centre fast enough. They are receding away from us at increasing speeds approaching that of the speed of light, and accelerating. This is the Red Shift [of decayed light]. So, in short: attraction and repulsion become an event which is relative to the distance between two [or more] objects.



WITH THE TABLET THIS STRONG-WEAK FORCE IS ACTUALLY CONSTANT OVER VARIOUS DISTANCES. Somehow, it, as a field, generates and substitutes the loss of attraction over distance maintaining a constant between itself and everything else [on Earth anyway]. This is most unusual.

This is only the beginning of the enigma. Objects which are essentially fields of varying electromagnetic strengths [and weaknesses] endow space with its actual properties. Plainly put: objects are a condition of space enclosing space with the condition of the object's properties.

At any given moment any number of possible fields may, theoretically exist in an apparently diffuse [and realistically impossible – except at sub atomic levels] state. It, [the object] cannot be several fundamental fields at once on the macro scale. The field which is relative can only be so and cannot be anything else. It cannot be diffuse because the fundamental field is what it is.

But on the particle level this is not entirely true. Until it collapses from its wave function into a stable field an object can be any number of things. But when the wave has made up its mind it becomes one thing and one thing only. The Tablet does not entirely conform to this. It cannot be what it is not, yet it is not what it is. I know this is a terrible way to put it but as you will see I am describing to you what is a verifiable truth.

THE TABLET IS THE RESULT OF AN APPARENTLY DIFFUSE SYSTEM [being all things at all times – circumscribed by specific parameters]. In short: THE TABLET IS MORE THAN ONE SPECIFIC FIELD. IT IS A COMBINATION OF A MULTITUDE OF FIELDS, ALL SIMULTANEOUSLY INDEPENDENT OF BOTH SPACE AND TIME. I cannot convey fully to you what all this means. I know I have not slept for several nights. In other words: THE TABLET IS A COMPOUND OF

SEVERAL REALITIES. Imagine several brains existing within one mind occupying not just space[s] but adding time as an extra dimension. This increases the theoretically possible number of brains existing simultaneously over time, adding them from both the past and the future as well. Something like this has happened within the Tablet.

Results from our tests within the accelerator confirmed my suspicions. Exhilaration would be more exact. Under normal conditions particles are in themselves ageless. Atoms, electrons, positrons, muons etc are not born, do not mature and then end their cycle with their death. That is impossible because of the law of conservation of energy. What does create decay is the organisation of other particles and their attendant field. This interaction is known as entropy. Loss of data. The make up changes, not the constituent parts, which may transform but do not vanish.

If an atom were placed in a specified area within a pure vacuum it would remain there for all eternity. In reality though there are infinite interactions between the various fields creating relative internal change in things. This we perceive as the passing of time. Yet it is not quite as simple as that either.

Essentially things are governed by two sorts of time.

The first is of course relative time. This concerns [and is measured by] the microscopic laws where the time-reversal-invariant leads to an increase in the actual time process, which includes the change of status of energy. It is based upon the microscopic information available within the field-object. This microscopic activity gives the object its relative time span.

The second is where the macroscopic laws create a lack of a time-reversal-invariant which leads to variable entropy. This is the overall, the general decay of things. It is the way of enclosed systems which fall apart if no new energy is applied. Given then

that the universe's energy is constant, the system of entropy becomes infallible. A good illustration is the birth, maturity and death of stars. It is equally true for all objects and all living things found in the universe.

Given this background another occurrence amazed us with regards to the Tablet: somehow or other the electromagnetic field and its constituent wavelengths-come-particles had WASHED OUT THE MICROSCOPIC INFORMATION so that we could not get any readings as far as this internal change was concerned. No information could be obtained regarding the individual status of the expected microscopic motions. They were COMPLETELY REPRESSED AND TOTALLY ELIMINATED. This is akin to raiding the family photograph album but seeing nevertheless the photos which are not there. I tell you dear friend this Tablet is becoming a puzzle of major proportions.

Here we have something that exists even though it VIOLATES THE TIME-REVERSAL-CHARACTER OF THE MICRO WORLD. And if that were not enough it also circumvents the law of entropy. This Tablet as far as we can tell is ageless, existing like our atom in pure space. But it is not in pure space nor is it in a pure vacuum. The Tablet as a field exists AS IF IT WERE IN SUCH A [NON] FIELD ENVIRONMENT.

My preliminary conclusions I leave last because of the highly speculative nature of the scientific findings our comrades at the institute have assembled regarding this unique artefact.

An object is a group of atomic fields creating a new whole composed of its variant packets of energy, viz., a set of thermodynamic-macro-variables, the result of the distribution of its microscopic motions. Remember that in the Tablet this was washed out thus lacking the time-reversal-variant. And as we expected by now one of our logical hunches bore out. We were finally on the right track. The constituent thermodynamic

variables which can be easily measured REGISTERED AT A CONSTANT: they in themselves were missing, BEING CONTROLLED WITHIN THE TABLET. Here was further evidence that this thing was AGELESS FUNCTIONING OUTSIDE THE KNOWN LAWS OF SPACE AND TIME. But more followed as a consequence of this revelation. We continued our tests to verify the other underlying peculiarities of the Tablet.

At any given time with any given object there must always be a certain degree of [relative] disorganisation. A perfect object can only exist under absolute conditions [which do not exist, ipso facto...]. Even the act of measuring something is in itself a scrambling of data which one aims to assess. The object under observation is changed by the act of observation for we disturb by interference the convergence of our measured reality [object]. If I insert an absolutely ice cold thermometer into water to measure its temperature I will in fact not be measuring the temperature of the water as it were prior to my immersing the thermometer. This is because the energy within the thermometer will be added [or subtracted] with the energy of the water which is now changed, interfered and scrambled from the original state of the water. What happens of course is that there is then no objective observer for he/she unites with the subjective subject to form a new combination of energy fields.

To sum up: with any such interference and attempted assessment where there is a dissipation of energy there occurs an increase in the second law of thermodynamics. If our thermometer is [in theory] cold enough it could freeze the water it is measuring. We would not get the original reading we expected and neither is the water any more in the same state it had been prior to our interference. This is happening at all times and in all places.

Knowing this we tried to subject the Tablet to specific measurements to try to ascertain the [its relative] rate of intensity of the second law of thermodynamics. Given the Tablet had so far broken enough laws the result was not entirely unexpected. No matter how much anti-matter we bombarded it with, there was no reaction, not a murmur. This cannot be yet it was so. And here comes the rub: the only field [known so far] which is independent of the second law IS OUR OWN HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS. It is independent of the interference I mentioned. We die [decay] only because our body as matter conforms to the relevant laws. OUR CONSCIOUSNESS DOES NOT.

What does this indicate? Our tradition of science is strong. The laws upon which this is built are rock solid. Except now we have this Tablet. It exists and this can only be through some energetic agent and its inherently constructed laws aiming to create a specific field – the Tablet. Its constituent parts exist as a continuum over and above time.

A foundation must exist for these strange laws to form such a perplexing object and this foundation must constitute a form of energy. By all appearances and as far as I can ascertain THE TABLET EXISTS INDEPENDENTLY WITHIN [OR SUPERIMPOSED UPON] OUR REALITY. IT IS A MATERIAL PROJECTION OF MATTER SUPERCEDING ALL KNOWN LAWS OF NATURE. IT IS A UNIVERSE WITHIN AND INDEPENDENT OF OUR UNIVERSE WITHOUT. THIS FIELD, THE TABLET EXISTS BUT THE LAWS SUPPORTING THE FIELD DO NOT. IT EXISTS IN OUR TIME BUT NOT [AND YET IT DOES] IN OUR SPACE. IT IS A CONCRETE MANIFESTATION EXISTING IN ITS OWN PECULIAR SPACE WHICH OCCUPIES OUR SPACE.

What has happened? As light can be projected in an image which has no substance [except as photons of light] so too this Tablet is a projection of itself in a more

tangible form. We know the images of television to be electronic impulses and that we can only measure the light and its electromagnetic wavelength of that image. We measure thus only the resonance of light electrons which are not the same as those of the projected image.

So it is with the Tablet. BUT ITS PROJECTION IS FAR MORE ADVANCED. IT ACTUALLY SEEMS TO REPRODUCE ITS OWN UNIQUE CONSTITUENT PARTS WHICH WE CANNOT MEASURE.

Even though:

- 1] they are not there,
- 2] what is there should not be but is and
- 3] it obeys no known laws, obeying its own laws.

We do know it is artificial and so must come from a civilisation which we presume to be exo-terrestrial. Given its unique status leads me to the hypothesis that a form of energy MUST BE FEEDING IT TO KEEP IT IN THIS, ITS OWN STATE negating thereby the laws of universal entropy. As long as the Tablet conforms with the laws of the source means THE SOURCE MUST STILL BE ACTIVE AT THIS VERY MOMENT. THE FIELD IS UNDER CURRENT ACTIVATION WORKING AS AN ONGOING PROCESS.

We do not know if it's a probe, whether it is remote controlled, under direct observation or used as surveillance. Semenov did not think any of our contemporaries have created this.

Semenov brought up a vivid if disturbing point. This controlled field could exert upon the human mind specific wavelengths so tailor made that the mind would be under

total control through the projection of its field upon that of the minds inducing thus the prerequisite state required.

Yet I do not think [hope is more correct] the Tablet is capable of this on its own simply because of the consistently constant readings of its field, which should have been consistently variable. And brain scans have revealed the Tablet's resonance as being thoroughly unrelated to any impulses which could manipulate the brain in any way [so far]. If Semenov is correct it could only occur if the field of the Tablet works in conjunction with an amplifying source which would trigger the Tablet's powers, manipulating the mind through para-psychological intrusions.

The Tablet is in a different yet constant location of space. Different in the sense that yesterday the planet was in a different location in space yet the field moved with the trajectory through time. Here comes the cinch. If Semenov was right then the TABLET MAY WELL BE A PROJECTION OF [ITS] PAST INTO ITS FUTURE [OUR PRESENT].

Could we not eventually project objects of our own choice into our future, or better still into our past? What would have happened had we engineered the 1905 revolution with a bit of help from the future? Then mother Russia would have been more than prepared when the Imperialists fell upon themselves in 1914 – and us in 1918!

So Yuri you can see what we have stumbled upon. This Tablet is scientifically and historically a means of grasping both the past and the future.

The Tablet is independent of them as is its field. There is no reason why we should not be able to create a field independent of time AND USE IT TO OUR ADVANTAGE.

Hoping to see you soon, my regards to all, and I remain yours etc.,

Dr. Z

**Summary of 000-3790-1:**

- 1] made of an unknown and unidentifiable material
- 2] material [atomic weight] heavier than constituted atoms
- 3] strong-weak force is constant over distance
- 4] tablet is of diffuse nature viz., a combination of fundamental fields
- 5] it has a lack of microscopic information violating:
  - i] the time-reversal-character of the micro world
  - ii] leaves no distribution of microscopic motions
  - iii] has no thermo-dynamic macro-variables
- 6] is independent of outside interference. No scrambling occurs during attempts of measurements of its interference-convergent realities.
- 7] no increase in the second law of thermo-dynamics.

*PS: This is the most delightful problem I have ever come across. Naturally I will keep you informed. Hoping to see you soon yours etc.;*

*PPS: the deaths at the institute at D. especially of its esteemed team leader [no names for obvious reasons] and the disappearance of the Colonel disturbs me – knowing what we know – I hope this tragedy is not related {?} knowing further what his mission had entailed. My condolences to their families.*



**Addendum: [cleared n.d.]**

The world of course is blissfully unaware of the developments occurring in the Soviet Union let alone her real reason for securing Afghanistan. Advances in scientific knowledge, especially in astro-physics, cosmology, particle-physics and para-psychology might solve the brief of Dr Z.

At this point the enigma is still cloaked as a riddle. It may occur that the future itself is challenged.

We must be wary, cautious, vigilant and determined to see this through.

Androponov.

