

A FANTASTICAL ALLEGORY BASED ON FACT

FOR REAL-LIFE EVIDENCE OF THE MISSING NUKE
'GOOGLE' :- 'MISSING NUKES MAHDI DARIUS NAZEMROAYA'

IN THE REALM OF THE SOUL

BY

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EARTH-REALM

As the day of my departure approached, I cleared my mind and purified my body. I prayed every morning and never took the talisman or Janice's ring from around my neck, except to shower. I ate only rice, fish and fruit and drank bottled water. I ran every morning and spent an hour every evening stretching and meditating. I went to bed early and slept long, dreamless sleeps.

On the evening before my departure I secretly packed the few things I would need and left early the next morning. Tom and the others had been in bed for only a few hours. They were sleeping soundly and I didn't wake them. There was nothing to say that they would have understood.

The drive up into the mountains calmed my spirit as it always did. I arrived at Janice's place just as the sun was beginning to warm the hills. I drove off the road, up a dusty track and parked behind one of the derelict houses. The Mustang was invisible from the road. No one would find it here.

I went to where I had buried my money and put the talisman inside. Jess would find it when he followed the instructions I had left. He would distribute some of the money as directed, but the talisman he would have to deal with by himself. I reflected on how right Israel Regardie had been when he had said that all magic for powers was evil. The talisman belonged with Mammon, so it was fitting that it lay with the money I had strived so hard to obtain.

I climbed a rocky hillside to a little plateau that nestled in the lee of a large rock. It was cool here in the shade. The view over the surrounding countryside was panoramic. From here I could see but not be seen.

I spread out around me the few things I would need. I squatted cross-legged with my Talmud, a copy of Il Principio and a bottle of water within easy reach. Wearing my kappel and prayer shawl, I fasted as I read from the Talmud and recited Il Principio over and over again.

I watched the sun set and the moon rise. In the chill of the night I took the blanket from beneath me and draped it about my shoulders. In the darkness I reached inside myself and found that place where I used to go when in solitary confinement.

My spirit, fired in the furnace of solitude, was an awesome and wondrous thing to behold. I examined 'The Beast' and bent it to my will. I would need its strength in the ordeal that was to come. I talked with God about death and argued with the Devil about the meaning of life. As the dawn broke and the sun rose again, I stood and felt the power course through my body. I was ready.

The Mustang was where I had left it. I drove to a petrol station and put it through the car wash. It emerged sleek and glistening. In the wash-room I washed, shaved and put on clean clothes. Then I was on the road again.

To the east of Marbella there is a part of the motorway that runs closely parallel to the sea. With the azure blue waters of the Mediterranean on one side and the massy, rugged cliffs on the other, the autovia sweeps majestically through El Faro. At one point, rounding a bend, there is a stretch of road that runs straight as an arrow to the foot of a massive, white rock-face before cutting sharply around it to continue on towards Marbella.

Sometimes, when the sun is at the right angle and there is no cloud, a trick of light occurs. The sun-light, reflecting off the sea, lights up the straight stretch of road and the white rock-face at its end, creating a continuous, brightly shining 'avenue of light' that

seemingly stretches to infinity. If ever there were to be a cosmic gateway in this earthly dimension I felt that this was where it would be.

I had timed this run regularly. As I rounded the bend into the straight stretch of road I had reached the thirteenth and final verse of Il Pricipio.

The shining, gun-metal blue bullet that was the Mustang, hurtled along the 'avenue of light' towards the cosmic gateway. As it met and became one with the translucent rock-face I felt a surge of pure energy. It was a consummation devoutly to be wished. Ardent pursuit of Janice.

TRANSITION

There was only darkness, deep, pitch black, impenetrable darkness. I was barely aware of my consciousness, a state somewhere between sleep and dreaming. I experienced a sensation of falling, or rather, of sinking. With no feeling at all from my body I could only have known this intuitively. Yet the knowledge didn't distress me. It all seemed quite natural.

I was also aware that the rate of sinking was accelerating. I recalled that practitioners of voodoo believe that the soul sinks into the abysmal waters for a year and a day, before rising to the surface again. I calmed the emotional turmoil that had begun in the Mustang and figuratively settled back to let the process run its course.

SOUL-REALM

There was only brightness, a stark, blinding surfeit of light that set my eyes to watering so badly I was virtually blind. Tears ran down my cheeks as I felt the burning heat of an unrelenting sun on my face. My consciousness was firm and focused. I was instantly aware of rivulets of sweat coursing down my back and legs as perspiration burst from every pore.

I mopped the water from my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt. Slowly, my vision cleared. I was on a vast, sandy plain that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. It was completely featureless, with not even a dune to break the monotony. I saw that the sun was low in the sky, so it must still be quite early in the day, or whatever passed for periods of time in this new dimension. It was extremely hot right now. I rationalised that, later on, it would become unbearable.

This prompted me to get moving. In this corporeal state no doubt I could die in this new dimension. Perhaps death was a process rather than an event. One could progress through a series of deaths. The first problem was to decide in what direction to head. Every horizon was completely featureless. The decision was academic.

Just as I set off I noticed something. Far, far off in the distance there was a faint smudge of darkness low in the sky. It hardly had shape or form, and was merely a faint shade of darker sky. Perhaps it was a cloud. With no other clue on offer, I headed in its direction.

Progress was slow and painful. As I drove myself forward, much energy was wasted by my feet sliding sideways in the deep sand. An age passed and it seemed that I had made very little headway. The cloud seemed just as far away. The reality intruded that perhaps I wouldn't make it. Already I was feeling dehydrated and weary.

I focused my mind sharply. The experience of ten thousand physical work-outs allowed me to analyse the interaction of muscles and break down the dynamics of it all. I relaxed stressed and tired areas and mentally blocked the pain. Almost trance-like, I willed myself forward.

A stumble brought me out of it. As I regained my balance I looked up quickly. I gasped in surprise. Seemingly only a short time had passed, yet the cloud was close now. I examined the possibility that I had indeed somehow willed myself across the distance. Perhaps there were strange qualities to the physics of this dimension. Maybe I had as yet un-recognised powers here.

Just as I readied myself to continue I noticed what looked like a road or track up ahead, cutting across my path and stretching either way for as far as the eye could see. As I drew closer it became clear that it was no construction, but rather just churned up sand disturbed by the passage of many feet. I fell to my knees to examine the phenomenon more closely.

The path was no more than six feet wide, so whatever creatures had passed were used to journeying in a long column. My immediate guess of horses or camels or cattle was quickly discarded as I noticed that there were no signs of hooves. Rather, the feet were narrow and quite pointed. Curious now, I decided to follow the tracks for a while before carrying on towards the distant small cloud.

Perhaps twenty minutes later I noticed something lying on the track just up ahead. I had been growing increasingly confident of my new surroundings as the time had passed. From my limited knowledge of deserts back on Earth I was aware that there

were few dangers for humans, other than the obvious ones of thirst and starvation. It seemed that even the predators avoided the barren wastelands. However, I cautioned myself, that didn't necessarily mean that there were no desert predators here in this new dimension.

Slowly, cautiously I advanced on the motionless form. In an unrelievedly sand-coloured environment its purple colouring stood out in stark relief. At ten feet away I stopped abruptly, as fear replaced my original feeling of surprise. It was quite clear what I was looking at, although initially the mind rejected it. Back on Earth it would have been some kind of tropical ant, but it wouldn't have been eight feet long or stood three feet at the shoulder.

I rapidly re-appraised my environment. One species of creature that abounded in deserts back on Earth were insects. I ran through the various scorpions, spiders, wasps and other actors from the wildlife films I had watched. On the basis of the evidence of the giant ant it was reasonable to assume that other insects here would be similarly monstrous. I suddenly felt extremely vulnerable. Virtually all insects were predators and I would represent something of a tasty meal. I had no means of fighting them off and even less chance of out-running them. It seemed, quite literally, just a matter of time before my path crossed with theirs and I would die a horrific and painful death.

But I couldn't just stay where I was. I would die from hunger and thirst. As I looked around cautiously the very sand itself seemed ominous as I realised that insects regularly hid in the sand to surprise their prey. Nevertheless, rationality dictated that I distance myself from the dead ant before the rotting corpse attracted a predator.

But I was already too late. Something large, black and definitely insect-like was moving towards the ant. It was a natural reflex to turn and run, but that was my undoing. Hardly had I taken two paces than it was on me. I had a jumbled impression of something like a giant earwig before two bladed mandibles seized me by the legs, crushing them. The incredible pain induced a wave of nausea. I was aware of another mandible coming towards my chest, followed by more pain, then darkness.

The sinking feeling was almost reassuring. I was aware that I had been here before. I remember musing that at least I was safe here, safe from pain and a horrific death. The inevitable rise to the light was accompanied by a fear of what was to come. Sure enough, I seemed to be right back where I had first entered this new dimension, although one piece of desert was indistinguishable from the next.

For a while I stayed exactly where I was, lying partly obscured by the hot sand. I replayed the recent memories of what could only have been my death in the clutches of the earwig creature. I ran over the implications.

It seemed that I was in a desert world where the dominant forms of life were giant insects, from which I had absolutely no protection. It was as certain as day following night that eventually I would blunder into the path of one of them. It was equally certain that I would die a terrifying death. And each time this happened I would re-incarnate to this exact spot in the desert, to start the process all over again!

Despite the heat, I felt stone cold. If ever there was a 'hell', then this new dimension was undoubtedly it. Self-pity questioned what I had done to deserve it. By way of an answer, the two deaths I had caused rose before me like spectres. Strangely, it enabled me to pull myself together. I heard a small voice whisper inside me. It was enough to strengthen my will. If this was to be my fate, then so be it. In my Earthly incarnation as the dark warrior I had quite freely dispensed death. Now it was my turn to be on the receiving end. I had already been searching for salvation. I wondered how many horrific deaths I would have to endure before I found some.

I rose from the sand and headed in the direction of the distant cloud. Soon I came across the track made by the passing ant column. This time I didn't hesitate. I hurried across it and continued onwards.

A slight movement at the periphery of my vision caught my eye. A small, sandy-coloured shape moved against a similarly sandy-coloured back-drop. I stood stock still. Fledgling fear exercised me as I considered the possibility that another dangerous predator might lurk in the sand. For long seconds I looked more closely, then advanced slowly and warily on the phenomenon.

I began to discern the shape of a head. Not a human head, it was too elongated for that. But the snout, pronounced forehead and upright, pointed ears were decidedly dog-like. As a shudder shook its furry body the rest of it became apparent. It was a dog, and from its shape and the colour of its pelt, it seemed to be a golden retriever. A dry, rasping sound escaped its throat as it raised its head to look at me. But the effort was too much for it. With a gasp it sank back into the surrounding sand.

"Sorry boy, there's nothing I can do for you", I muttered. And indeed there wasn't. I was literally dying of thirst myself. I reflected that it wouldn't be too long before I was lying in the sand like the dog.

The thought galvanised me. I tore my attention away and propelled myself forward again. I stared hard at the cloud and saw that beneath it was a small range of mountains. Carefully husbanding my remaining strength I pushed myself onwards.

The date palms seemed to jump up out of the sand. I couldn't comprehend how I hadn't seen them earlier. They were spaced almost equidistantly around a brackish-looking pool. At its fringes were a riotous confusion of desert plants.

I was aware that a desert watering hole was precisely the sort of place that predators would wait to ambush their prey, but the ravages of thirst made me reckless.

I threw myself face-down in the sand and plunged my face into the pool. I drank deeply of the water and was immediately aware of its acrid taste. But I was beyond caring. If the water was poisoned, then it would be a more rapid and merciful death than dying of thirst. I drank some more, then rolled into the shade of a palm and briefly dozed.

I awoke with a start and was surprised to find myself thinking about the dog. In truth it was more than just thinking. I agonised over its predicament to such an extent that I started to pace up and down along the edge of the pool. I must take it some water. Having so recently suffered the pangs of extreme thirst I could fully identify with the dog's suffering.

I carefully considered the dangers of going back out into the desert and concluded that my intentions were thoroughly irrational. It barely gave me pause. There were rocky outcrops around the oasis. Sharp, flinty shards of shattered rock were strewn liberally around. I picked up a particularly elongated shard that resembled the blade of a knife. I tore a strip off my shirt and wrapped it around the blunt end. Now I had a workable knife.

Amongst the desert plants I recognized several cacti. I remembered reading that the inner flesh was succulent and full of water. Carefully avoiding the sharp thorns, I cut a small cactus from the ground. Pausing only to saturate my shirt with pool water, I headed off back into the desert, following my footprints.

Once again I covered a long distance in what seemed to be insufficient time. The sun was now a raging inferno, burning into those areas of exposed flesh. I came upon the dog, but it was now lying motionless. I gently shook its head, but it was clearly unconscious.

Almost frantically, I cut into the flesh of the cactus. I yelped in pain as I impaled my hands on sharp thorns. Blood ran freely from the wounds as I scooped the pulpy interior in my hands and thrust it into the mouth of the dog. I squeezed it and clear water ran down its throat. Still it lay unmoving.

Coming to a decision, I scooped the dog up into my arms and headed back towards the oasis. Tortured arm muscles screamed under its weight. I focused and, oblivious to the pain, staggered onward. Nevertheless, as I entered the oasis I collapsed quite involuntarily and lay there for several minutes, breathing deeply.

The dog lay where I had dropped it. Still breathing deeply I picked it up and carried it over to the pool. I waded in, crouched down and immersed the dog's body up to the neck in the water, hoping this would cool it down. As its jaw hung open I splashed water into its mouth. Still there was no sign of life, but I refused to give up.

Gently laying it on the sloping bank I began to massage its chest. It was then that I made an amazing discovery. The dog's right, front leg was missing clear up to the chest. I examined where the leg ought to be, carefully parting the fur. There was no scar tissue nor anything that would indicate that there had once been a leg here. I pondered the possibility that this was some kind of genetic mutation. I meticulously examined the rest of the body for any other unusual features.

Almost immediately I made another discovery. I had previously assumed the dog to be a male, even referring to it as 'Boy' on occasions. Now the evidence of my eyes clearly told me that it was a bitch. I continued the examination, but found nothing else out of the ordinary. I couldn't help but conclude that my discoveries were all largely irrelevant now because the creature was obviously dead.

However, perhaps even the line between life and death was blurred in this dimension. I would err on the side of caution. Night seemed to be rapidly approaching. If this desert was anything like terrestrial deserts then the onset of darkness heralded extreme cold. I dried the dog as thoroughly as I could with my shirt and piled sand up over it, save for its head. I lay down, covering its body with mine.

I was tired to the point of exhaustion. Hunger pains gnawed at my stomach reminding me that I had eaten nothing all day. I looked longingly into the upper branches of the date palms. The climb to reach the dates was certainly beyond me at the moment. Reassuring myself that collecting some would be my first task for the morrow I fell into a deep sleep.

I dreamed of Janice. Together we walked hand in hand through the deserts of this new dimension. We dallied by the waters of a fecund oasis, feeding each other with exotic fruits. Her smile was that 'little girl' smile which had so enchanted me when first we met. Her laughter tinkled like rain on a wind-chime. Her face was clear and guileless, with no trace of the pain of her addiction. There was not the merest trace of Janice 2, the crack-induced persona, the very thought of which served to remind me of my mission here. I pushed away the darkness that the memory brought with it and, for the while, rejoiced in this blissful moment.

It was both the wetness and the sense of movement that woke me. In the early morning light I saw the dog standing over me, licking my face. A warm feeling of joy spread through my body from the knowledge that not only had I saved its life, but also that I would now have a companion to share the loneliness of this new dimension with.

"Okay girl, so are you well now?" I sat up quickly and began to stroke her. She responded like any normal dog, wagging her tail, shaking her head and barking gleefully. Then she sat back and howled a long, soulful howl.

“Well at least you’re a normal dog, apart from having only three legs. I don’t think I could have handled a talking dog right now.” As I spoke the dog looked at me quizzically.

“The first thing is to give you a name” I continued. “The one that immediately springs to mind is ‘Tripod’. How does that grab you?” The dog howled in response. “Okay, so that’s it then. Come on Tripod, let’s see what we can do about some breakfast.”

I stood and examined my surroundings anew and was reassured to see that nothing had changed from the previous day. I was still coming to terms with this new dimension and would have my hands full in dealing with it. I could well do without a reality that was constantly changing too.

I walked over to the smallest date palm and looked up into its branches. Although the trunk sloped at an acute angle the climb was precipitously steep. “Hope you like dates, Tripod”, I called over my shoulder as I began to make the climb. Tripod barked her reply, then scampered off in the direction of an outcrop of rocks. “I didn’t expect you to help. You just go and enjoy yourself”, I called after her.

Several attempts later I lay in the sand where I had fallen. There were few hand-holds on the trunk and the same thing happened every time. I reached a certain point, over-balanced and fell. Fortunately my landing was cushioned by the sand, but I had numerous welts on my chest where I had grazed the trunk on the way down. It did occur to me that, should I fall from the upper branches, I could well break something. As I stared up, pondering the problem, Tripod returned.

She ran up and dropped something in my lap. I recoiled as I brushed a large snake away. It lay motionless in the sand, obviously dead. I could discern deep bite marks just below its head. Tripod stood there, regarding me. I would have said that it was impossible for a dog to smile, but the look on Tripod’s face right now, lips retracted and teeth bared, was as near to a smile as any canine was liable to get.

“Okay girl. Very funny. I’ll do the serious business of trying to feed us, you just play about.”

Tripod barked, looked at the snake, then looked back at me. She was clearly a very intelligent dog and I got her drift immediately. “Unfortunately darling, I don’t eat snake. Snake and chips maybe, but certainly not raw snake. So will you please leave me alone while I try to get us some dates.” I walked back over to the palm.

I was lying in the sand where I had fallen for the umpteenth time when Tripod came galloping back. I noticed that the lack of a leg was of little hindrance to her. Somehow she seemed to be able to centre her remaining leg so that the weight of the front part of her body fell evenly upon it. In the circumstances she covered the ground at an amazing rate.

This time it was a small, furry creature that she dropped in my lap. It resembled a small rabbit and was as dead as the snake. I was just about to reprove her that I also didn’t eat raw rabbit when it dawned on me. It was I who was being obtuse, not the dog. She was bringing me the ingredients for a meal. I would have to figure out how to cook them.

“Well aren’t you just a clever girl then.” She ran over and I stroked her head. I began to look around for things to make a fire, putting out of mind for the moment the major problem of how to light it.

There was abundant material lying about, from broken branches to dead bushes and grass. All was tinder dry courtesy of the sun. I soon had a pile I could have roasted an ox on. Which brought me to the problem of lighting it. I had never been in the scouts, cubs, army cadets or even gone camping. I was a confirmed city boy. When I wanted to light something I just got a box of matches or a lighter.

I reassured myself that even the ancient cave men had managed to make fire. That didn't help me at all though. No doubt they had worked it out over time, through trial and error. Equally without doubt, many dim cavemen had had to get by with raw meat.

I looked over at the dog to see that she was looking closely at me. "Okay, okay, I'm thinking about it." Tripod made a huffing, snuffing bark and ran off towards the rocky outcrop again. "And bring me back a box of matches" I called after her.

Over amongst the rocky outcrop again, I raked through a detritus of shards of various kinds of rock. From the colours and the variety I guessed that this had been an area of recent volcanic activity. There was one kind of unusual rock that seemed to be in abundance. On the outside it looked exactly the same as any normal rock, but if you chipped at its exterior, just below the surface lay a centre of pure, mirrored glass.

I spent some time smashing rock against rock, but the outcome was inevitably the same. The outer, dull layer would fracture and slice off, revealing a face of mirrored glass. The trick would be to slice off two parallel layers of dull exterior, leaving mirrored faces top and bottom. I was confident that this would give me a type of magnifying glass through which I could concentrate the sun-light and focus it on dried grass.

Several dozen smashed rocks later, all I had to show for my efforts was a severely battered and bloody thumb, courtesy of misdirected blows. I sat, roundly cursing the inanimate rocks. Hearing a snuffing sound behind me I turned to see Tripod sitting, looking at me. "And you. Don't say a damned word", I yelled at the dog, who promptly ran off.

Strangely enough, at my very next attempt I succeeded. The result was an ovoid piece of rock perhaps an inch thick, with mirrored faces top and bottom. Smiling with satisfaction I headed back to the banks of the pool and the stash of raw food.

Tripod was already there. Clearly she had given up on me, for she had started on the food. She was chewing enthusiastically on one of the small rabbits, pausing only to look up as I approached. "Oh ye of little faith", I sang out, brandishing the mirrored rock at her. "Some of us will be eating HOT food very soon now." The dog was completely unmoved and returned to chewing at the rabbit.

I had the next bit all figured out, because it was very straight-forward. I had found a sheet of slatey-looking rock, eighteen inches square and about an inch thick. This would serve as a hot-plate. I mounted it on four pillars of rock, one at each corner. I now had a passable oven. In the space underneath the hot-plate I stuffed handfuls of dried grass.

The dog was now looking at me with interest again. I made much of aligning the mirrored glass with the sun and a particularly dry bunch of grass. I slid the glass back and forth along the alignment until I saw a tightly-focused beam of sun-light fix on the grass.

My scream startled the dog, which scampered away and hid behind the nearest date palm. I plunged my singed fingers into the cooling waters of the pool, which provided some relief. Pulling my hand from the pool, I blew on my fingers. I looked round at the dog, but it had its head hidden by the tree. Nevertheless, I could still hear the snuffing sounds.

I searched for the glass and, with relief, saw it was lying in the sand. If I had dropped it on the rocky stove it could well have shattered and I would have had to start all over again. Avoiding touching it directly, I wet a strip of my ever-diminishing shirt and wrapped it around the glass. Twisting the cloth tightly, I managed to handle the hot glass without touching it with my bare hands.

The dry grass first smoldered, then burst into flame. I quickly piled on twigs, then substantial small branches. Suddenly the rock stove was a blazing inferno. It was the

work of minutes to skin the snake and rabbits. Soon pieces of snake and rabbit flesh were sizzling merrily on the hot-plate. At which juncture the dog returned and sat close by.

“Oh, so you’ve come for your share, have you?”, the sarcasm was thick in my voice. “Well fair’s fair. You’ve already had a rabbit. That means two rabbits and half a snake for me, but just one rabbit and half a snake for you. Got anything to say about it?”

The dog sat motionless, but its lips were retracted and its teeth bared again. Ignoring this I continued, “And I hope for both our sakes that you haven’t brought me a poisonous snake.”

To a stomach wracked by hunger pains, the cooked food tasted delicious. Both the dog and I ate every scrap. Tripod rolled over on her side and immediately fell asleep. Propping myself up against a nearby palm tree, I did the same.

I must have slept for several hours. When I awoke I lolled against the tree, rubbing my stomach contentedly. I now knew that I could survive here indefinitely. There was a virtually inexhaustible supply of fuel for the fire and I was confident that Tripod could catch enough food to keep us going.

Two other factors were reassuring. There seemed to be no giant insects in the vicinity of the oasis and the snake and the rabbit-like creatures were the size they’d normally be back on Earth. Clearly, there were areas in this new dimension where I could survive.

But I hadn’t embarked on my mission to sit by an oasis for the rest of my life with a three-legged dog. I didn’t know what my next step should be, but I did know that I should leave as soon as possible. However, there was some preparation to do. We needed provisions to travel with.

I woke the dog. Through a combination of pointing at the remains of the snake and the rabbit, then pointing in the direction of the rocks, she got my drift. As she scampered away I collected more fuel.

Once again I skinned the carcasses and cooked the meat on the hot-plate. As soon as it had cooled sufficiently I wrapped it in the remains of my shirt. The problem was the water we would need for the journey. There was nothing to carry it in. The only solution was to carry one of the water-filled cacti with us.

From the vantage point of our oasis the mountains looked very close now, certainly no more than a dozen miles away. Pausing only to drink as much as I possibly could from the pool, I headed off into the desert again with Tripod bringing up the rear. There was one nasty moment. Far up in the featureless blue sky I saw a sudden flash of colour. I crouched down in the sand and pulled the dog close.

Whatever it was seemed to be circling. It was hard to tell in the unrelenting glare, but as it circled ever lower and in ever tighter circles I could discern a bright yellow colour with an occasional dash of bright red. I stayed motionless, trying to figure out if it was circling us. But we were easily two hundred yards from the oasis now. The lower it got the clearer it was that it was circling the oasis.

By now it was barely fifty feet above us and quite clearly distinguishable. There were two areas of bright yellow and in the middle of each a perfectly circular red dot. We were looking at a giant butterfly, but with wings the size of cricket field sight screens.

I couldn’t recall if Earth’s butterflies were carnivorous, but I resolved to take no chances. I waited until it settled on the ground and began to drink from the water before hurrying off, keeping low to the ground.

EDEN

The closer we got to the mountains the higher and sheerer they seemed. They reared up out of the desert sand like some great rocky wall. It looked like there was no way through or over them, so for a while we headed parallel to them.

It was Tripod who noticed the gully first, a shallow depression that led away towards the sheer cliffs. I would have ignored it as a dead end, but she barked loudly and ran into it. I followed and soon found myself in a narrow valley. This looked a lot more promising, so I quickened my pace to catch up with the dog. Side by side we walked between sheer ramparts that seemed to be funneling us deeper into the mountains.

Rounding a bend I was surprised to see a narrow opening in the cliffs barely a hundred feet away. Beyond it a steep slope led into an impossibly green valley. I stopped on the brow of the slope to take it all in, Tripod sitting beside me.

The thought that immediately struck me was that we had found Eden, for a more perfect paradise would have been hard to imagine. Exotic trees, bushes, plants and flowers assaulted the senses with a riotous confusion of colour. The various scents combined to almost overwhelm me. An azure blue stream flowed from the mountains to disappear into a rocky outcrop not far from where we stood. Myriad small creatures could be seen running amongst the vegetation. Multi-coloured birds swooped and called through the branches of the trees.

The valley was oval in shape and covered an area the size of a dozen or so football pitches. It was surrounded on all sides by the sheerest, smoothest of cliffs that even a skilled mountaineer would have found impossible to climb. At the far end I could discern the opening of a large cave.

Suddenly Tripod launched herself forward and ran down the slope. I set off after her. She stopped abruptly at the foot of the slope and sniffed at something that looked like a pile of bones. Immediately her hackles went up and she looked around warily. A deep growl escaped her throat. Spinning around she ran towards me, barking frantically.

Thinking her to be merely excited I made to walk around her, but she ran in front of me again, growled menacingly and made as if to bite me. It shocked me into coming to a complete halt. Up until now Tripod had displayed only the sweetest of temperaments. I had never even considered the possibility that she might attack me.

“What’s the matter, girl? What’s up”, I enquired, quite puzzled.

She ran in close, seized the material of my trousers and made as if to pull me back up the slope. The dog had shown surprising perspicacity before, so I thought it best to humour her. I turned and hurried back up the slope with her yapping at my heels.

As I neared the top something made me turn my head. I saw the dark opening of a cave that I hadn’t noticed before. It was tucked away in the curvature of the cliffs, close to the opening that led into the valley. At the same time I noticed movement in the darkness of the cave’s interior, causing me to pause and look closer.

The mouth of the cave must have been thirty feet in height and the same in width. Emerging from the gloom was a sight that at first I found it impossible to comprehend. Sheer terror rooted me to the spot as a gigantic, black scorpion, roughly the same dimensions as the mouth of the cave, emerged at a trot.

It was Tripod’s barking that brought me out of it. In sheer panic I ran to the top of the slope and continued into the narrow valley that we had passed through earlier. Despair gripped me as I realized that I wouldn’t be able to outrun the creature. “Go girl, go”, I

yelled at Tripod, hoping that at least she would save herself. She ran a few more yards then stopped abruptly, looking back the way we had come.

I ran past her then looked back over my shoulder. To my surprise the scorpion had stopped at the narrow mouth to the valley. Quite clearly it was too big to squeeze through. For several minutes it thrashed in the opening, waving its pincer claws in frustration. Then, giving up, it turned and made its way back to the cave from whence it came.

My heart still pounding, I sat on the ground to regain my breath. Tripod ran to sit next to me. "Clever girl, clever girl", I gasped, rubbing her head in gratitude. "You saved my life there. That makes us even, eh?" She responded by running back to the top of the slope and peering into the valley.

By now I was convinced that this was a very special dog indeed. Warily I joined her and stared in the direction of the cave. There was some movement just inside, so no doubt the scorpion was lurking in case we entered the valley again. There was absolutely no chance of that, but I was contemplating how we could get past it. The option of returning to the oasis wasn't an option at all. This valley offered a habitat that would sustain the both of us in comparative luxury indefinitely.

My gaze returned to the bottom of the slope and the pile of bones that Tripod had been sniffing at. I guessed they were the remains of some unfortunate who had wandered into the valley before us. As I looked deeper into the valley I could discern other piles of bones. Quite clearly the scorpion had been here for some time and was some kind of guardian of the valley.

From the incredible size of the creature I dismissed the idea that I might make some kind of weapon to kill it. A flame-thrower or main battle tank might do the trick, but even a rocket launcher might well miss a vital organ. Anyway, such sophisticated weaponry wasn't available to me. The most I could possibly muster was a sling-shot and all that would do would be to annoy the beast. A leap of imagination was called for.

I examined the environs of the mouth of the cave more closely. Either side and immediately above it the cliffs rose smooth and sheer. Even if I had clear access to them they were impossible to climb. However, a couple of hundred feet above the cave the cliffs fell back into a gentler slope, which was liberally strewn with great boulders. It gave me the germ of an idea.

I called Tripod away from the mouth of the valley. Taking her head in my hands I spoke directly to her. "Now listen girl. You've got to do exactly as I say. I want you to wait here for me until I come back. I will come back, but for now you've got to wait here."

She cocked her head to one side and looked deep into my eyes. Intuitively I knew she understood. As I walked away she remained where she was. She lowered her head onto her paws and gazed after me.

I retreated back up the valley the way we had come, but this time counting my paces. I scoured the cliffs looking for a way up. About one hundred paces along I saw a fissure in the face of the cliff that disappeared upwards. Gingerly I put first one foot in the fissure, then the other and began to climb. I had never been mountain climbing and had little head for heights. I resolved not to look down. If I hadn't felt that my life depended on it I would have stayed firmly on the ground.

About two hundred feet up, the cliff began to slope gently backwards and climbing became a lot easier. Another two hundred feet saw me to the top of the cliff. Now I looked down, trying to figure out exactly where I had started up. It seemed that I had climbed almost vertically, that is, in a straight line. Remembering the number of paces I had taken along the valley floor, I made my way along the crest of the ridge.

If my calculations were correct, I was now directly above where the entrance to the valley was. Sure enough, the ridge curved round to the left. I figured out that the scorpion's cave was about twenty feet along this curve, although it was impossible to look straight downwards to see it. I paced out what I thought to be twenty feet and placed an unusually-coloured large rock as a marker.

There were numerous large boulders strewn about these upper slopes, surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of smaller ones. I searched for the particular boulder I was looking for, the quest taking me ever upwards. This wasn't a problem for my plan. The important thing was to find the right boulder.

The grey monolith stood as it had for thousands of years. Immovable and immutable, its time-worn face had been deeply eroded by the elements. I stood in its shadow, dwarfed by its mass. There was no way of really telling, but it must have weighed all of twenty tons. I contemplated the logistics of trying to move it.

These upper slopes were covered in vegetation. Blasted by the sun, the bushes and small trees were gnarled and starved of water. Many were long dead and as tinder dry as the grass that surrounded them. I gathered armfuls and piled it in the vee-shaped space between the upright monolith and the sloping rock face.

Hopefully the extreme temperatures generated by the burning vegetation would shatter the base of the monolith, sending it crashing down the slope. On its way it would collide with other, smaller rocks, so causing a major avalanche. If my calculations were correct, several hundred tons of rock would fall to the floor of the valley, blocking the entrance to the scorpion's cave, with the creature trapped inside.

Or that was the theory. There were so many unknowns that any of a whole range of things could go wrong, starting, of course, with my not being able to move the monolith. Then there was the possibility that the scorpion might be out of the cave when the rocks fell. In that eventuality there would be nothing left for us but to return to the oasis to eke out the rest of our days.

I was by now becoming something of a dab hand with the magnifying glass. You didn't actually have to hold the thing. You could prop it up at the right angle and the sun's rays would do the rest. I positioned it between two small rocks so that the narrow beam fell on some of the grass. Then I sat back to wait.

The dried vegetation soon burst into flame. Dense smoke billowed upwards as I piled on more fuel, causing my eyes to water and smutting my cheeks with soot. The base of the monolith glowed first red hot, then incandescent white. Still it stood immovable. I piled on more vegetation to no avail. I had run out of ideas.

A small nagging sensation low in my abdomen alerted me to the fact that I needed to urinate. I dismissed the feeling as an irrelevance in the circumstances, then re-evaluated the decision. I walked to stand on the slope directly above the monolith. Blinded by the smoke, the heat was almost unbearable. Unbuttoning my trousers, I directed my urine stream down onto the base of the monolith.

A cloud of super-heated steam shot upwards, narrowly missing emasculating me. A resounding 'crack' came from the base of the monolith as I fell sideways onto the slope. It undoubtedly saved me. The monolith fell, crashing onto the slope exactly where I had been standing seconds earlier. Then, with a roar like rumbling thunder, it began to slide down the slope.

As it went it gathered other, smaller rocks with it. Colliding with two equally large rocks it sent them both ricocheting sideways, sparking two similar avalanches that thundered down the cliff in tandem with the monolith. Finally, this massive movement of rock reached the edge of the sheer cliff leading down to the floor of the valley and

disappeared from view. Several seconds later there was a resounding crash, the reverberations from which I could feel in the rock beneath me. Then all was quiet.

I headed back the way I had come. Negotiating the descent of the fissure, twice I almost fell. I pondered the irony of my trapping the scorpion only to die on the way back. I reminded myself that it remained to be seen whether I had indeed trapped the scorpion. I would find out soon enough.

As I approached the entrance to the valley, Tripod was nowhere to be seen. I ran to the top of the slope and scoured the valley. I saw her immediately. A small mountain of rock now stood where the mouth of the scorpion's cave used to be. Tripod was running up and down nearby, barking excitedly. Needless to say, there was no sign of the scorpion. Nevertheless I examined the rock-fall carefully. There was now several hundred tons of rock and other detritus completely obscuring the mouth of the cave. It was quite impossible for the scorpion to escape.

This brought my mind back to my second most important priority. I could clearly see the mouth of the other cave at the far end of the enclosed valley. The first thing to check out was whether this also had a predatory inhabitant. A complicating and dangerous factor was that I would have to enter right to the far end of the valley. Should another scorpion or similar monster run out, there would be no way for me to reach the narrow valley mouth and safety in time.

I calmed Tripod, pointed in the direction of the other cave and tried to convey to her the seriousness of the situation. Quite uncannily, the dog looked at me, peered intently at the mouth of the still far off cave, then sat back on her haunches as if it were thinking about the problem.

Suddenly she took off at a gallop. I had covered barely a hundred yards when she arrived at the mouth of the cave. I stopped to watch the outcome. She sniffed the ground, all the while keeping a wary eye on the opening. She took one last look back at me then plunged into the darkness of the cave.

I waited for what seemed to be long seconds. She re-appeared as quickly as she had gone. This time though she ran up and down, wagging her tail and barking loudly, before running back inside. I took this to mean that she had found nothing threatening. I hurried across the remaining several hundred yards, but stopped at the opening.

What gave me pause was the Stygian darkness. It was an inky, velvety black that seemed almost to have form and substance. Not only did it smother all light, even sound seemed to be suppressed. I could hear Tripod barking somewhere inside, but it sounded a very long distance off.

I called loudly to the dog to come out, but my voice did not carry at all. It reminded me of the pea-souper fogs that occasionally blanketed the London of my childhood. Quite clearly, one would have to prepare before entering a cave such as this. At the very least, several properly-made burning torches would be needed. But now that I knew there was nothing to fear from the cave, a full search of it became a lesser priority. The very next thing on the agenda was to secure a supply of food and water.

The valley proved to be a veritable orchard-cum-market garden-cum-wild-life habitat. Every kind of fruit hung from trees, bushes and vines. An extensive range of vegetables grew under foot. And amongst all the vegetation ran more of the rabbit-like creatures, together with flocks of creatures almost identical to wild turkeys, several of which were presently being chased by Tripod.

"That's it, girl, a turkey will do nicely. It'll be Christmas every day here", I shouted after her.

Next I investigated the stream. It burst from a fissure in the rock, close to the opening of the dark cave. Then, six feet wide and a couple of feet deep, it flowed swiftly the

length of the valley before disappearing again into a deep hole close to the entrance of the valley. At about mid-point in its length it branched off into a pond easily twenty feet in diameter. Through the clear water I could see schools of carp-like fish.

Although this was all very good news, it did concern me. If I had designed a perfect valley, a veritable Eden, I could hardly have improved on this one. Together with the giant scorpion guardian, it set me to thinking deeply. What would the scorpion feed on? Unless this particular scorpion was vegetarian, there wasn't enough wild-life in the valley to sustain it for a week. And what was it guarding? Surely not the fruit and veg? I concluded that the answer must lie in the dark cave, which was so strategically placed at the far end of the valley. Deny it as I might, to search the cave must be top of my list of priorities now.

However, I rationalized that I could put that off until the morrow. I needed to build some kind of habitation to protect me from the elements and lay up a stock of food. The latter I left to Tripod, whilst I cut branches from bushes and small trees to accomplish the former. Soon I had a passable lean-to shack, in the corner of which I constructed a rock larder to keep the food cool and fresh. That evening saw Tripod and I sitting around a blazing fire outside the shack. Turkey and rabbit sizzled on a hot-plate. Occasionally we got up to drink deeply from the cool, fresh water of the stream. I could only reflect that our situation had considerably improved from that of the previous day.

THE CAVE OF LIGHT

The following morning saw me preparing as if for a military operation. Several torches made from dried rushes lay ready for lighting. The rock-blade knife I had made at the oasis was now fixed to a long pole, making for a make-shift spear. I sat, thinking what else I could do, but finally had to confront the fact that I was only delaying the inevitable. I sprang to my feet, lit one of the torches from the remains of the fire and, with Tripod by my side, headed off in the direction of the dark cave.

Once again, Tripod ran on ahead of me and plunged into the darkness. With a confidence I really didn't feel I strode up to the entrance and, without hesitating, walked inside. It was something of an anti-climax, because I could still see very little. The burning torch threw out only enough illumination to light up a circular area about six feet in diameter. I could discern a small section of the floor of the cave, but the walls and ceiling were still hidden in the darkness.

Suddenly, high up in what must have been the roof of the cave, a bright light came on. As I examined it more closely I saw that it was octagonal in shape and about four feet across. From its illumination I saw that it was surrounded by other octagonal panels as yet unlit. Each panel closely abutted the surrounding panels, making for a network of octagonal shapes. It was at this stage I realised that what I had thought was a bright light was merely a highly-lit screen of some kind, reminiscent of a computer screen. All at once I was looking at the face of Janice.

Such was my surprise that I dropped the torch, which immediately went out. But I was beyond caring. All my attention was firmly focused on the image of Janice.

"Janice, Janice", I called out, my voice thick with emotion. "Is that you, Jan?"

Immediately, the image disappeared, only to reappear on an identical octagonal screen one hundred and eighty degrees to the right, but lower down. This in turn disappeared, reappearing again on a screen vertically above me. Thenceforth the image was in constant motion. Faster and faster, it flickered from screen to screen until it was racing so fast that it seemed to be on all the screens simultaneously.

Almost sub-consciously, I noted that the inside of the cave was perfectly dome-shaped and the whole surface was covered with octagonal screens that precisely abutted each other. The effect was mesmerizing, so much so that it overwhelmed my senses and I nearly fell.

"Janice", I screamed out at the top of my voice, as if imploring the effect to stop. At once the image ceased moving and appeared simultaneously on all the screens.

"Janice?" I said in a quieter, questioning voice.

"Is that who you think it is?" the deep, disembodied voice came out of nowhere.

"What? Who are you?" my reply was spontaneous.

"My question was, do you think that is Janice?" continued the voice.

"The image is of Janice. So I assumed it was Janice", I was less certain now.

"What if different individuals see what they want to see? In your case you want to see Janice" came the response.

The answer confused me. "But how do you know about Janice so that you can put her likeness up there?"

"In exactly the same way as I know most everything else in the universe" the voice was strong and confident now.

"So who are you?" I demanded angrily.

"Perhaps a more accurate question would be, what am I" came the reply.

"Okay, okay, so what are you?" my impatience was fueling the anger.

"I suppose you could say that I am the fount of all knowledge."

"Sort of like the Oracle of Delphi" I queried? a mere hint of sarcasm in my tone.

The voice either missed or ignored it. "Yes, something like that" it continued seamlessly. "Only that particular oracle was mythical and I am very much a reality. To put it within an earthly context, perhaps you should think of me as a kind of super, universe-wide internet, but with consciousness."

"So you're a machine" I stated boldly. The image of Janice had upset me and, no doubt, made me reckless.

"Noooooo". The reply was deep and booming. It reverberated in the narrow confines of the dome making me jump. "How typical of an earthman to make such a conclusion" the tone was softer, patronizing even. "I am one of the last of a very old race. A race that mastered the universe. Our civilization and our technology surpasses your own to such a degree that there is no comparison. We have long passed from the physical into the spiritual. Thus we have no physical form, but we have the power to manipulate matter. We can, quite literally, create anything, whether animate or inanimate, anywhere in the universe. That is the extent of our power." The last word was emphasized and drawn out.

"Almost like Gods." My tone was level and matter of fact.

"Yessss" the word was almost a Sybyllant hiss. "Like Gods, in so far as we have the power and the knowledge of Gods and are guided by the elemental force for good."

"Which implies an elemental force for evil" I responded quickly.

"Of course" came the voice. "An evil that, at first, I thought you to be very much a part of. I looked into your heart and saw that 'The Beast' is strong in you. You have murdered two people, sent two spirits prematurely into the void. And if you had not been stopped, no doubt you would have sent many more."

The accusation struck home and my reply was slow and hesitant. "But...I spent many years working to imprison 'The Beast' and I refuse to do any evil now."

"So you say, but what is the proof for that?" accused the voice.

"I can't prove it, but I did give up my life to pursue the demon that possessed Janice."

"Pah." There was exasperation in the voice's tone. "What do you know of possession? To pursue a single demon is akin to pursuing a single soldier for wrongs done in war. One must pursue the greater evil. Those evil-doers who caused the war. Evil in all its strength and power."

"But I am willing to do that, but how?" It was my turn to sound exasperated.

"Willing, yes, but are you worthy?" came the response. "You have been in this dimension only a short time and already you have done great harm. This place is called 'The Cave of Light', because, as its name implies, only goodness and light emanate from here. I am its controller and, if I have a home, this is it. Yet your actions have doomed us both to destruction."

"But how?" I demanded.

"You have entombed the guardian of this place in its cave. Even now our sworn enemies the Nephilim are sending an army of their slaves, the Naga, to destroy us. With every minute that passes they get closer and we have no protection now."

"But you said you are all-powerful. Can't you free the scorpion?"

The voice paused. "All things in the universe, good or evil, are subject to certain laws, commonly known as the 'Old Laws'. Certain things that are done, cannot be un-done, except by the person who caused them. It is up to you to free the guardian."

Now it was my turn to pause. The problem needed some serious thought. Several hundred tons of rock imprisoned the scorpion. Nothing short of a giant earth-mover would free it. "Can you not give me any help? I queried.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t give you any help. I said I couldn’t do it myself”, replied the voice. “What is it you want?”

“You said that you can create anything in the universe, anywhere in the universe, out of thin air, right?”

“Correct”, came the reply.

“Well materialize a giant bulldozer close to the entrance of the scorpion’s cave. You can do that, can’t you?” my questions hung in the air.

“I can and, in fact, it is already done” stated the voice matter-of-factly.

“Oh, and one other thing. You will need to protect me and the dog from the scorpion when it gets out.”

“That can be done quite easily”, said the voice. “Bring the dog closer to you.”

Tripod was now sitting a few feet away. I called to her and she came to sit by me. Suddenly, a yellow beam shone down from above, encompassing both of us. Then there was a humming sound for a few seconds before it switched off again.

“There, it is done”, said the voice. “Recognition between scorpions is done by both pheromones and vibrational communication. The guardian will now recognize you as one of its own.”

Well that might have been reassuring for me, but how did I communicate that to Tripod, sitting so trusting next to me. I would have to make sure that she wasn’t there when first I encountered the scorpion. Later, when the scorpion had accepted me, I would introduce her one step at a time. Perhaps when she saw that the scorpion didn’t harm me she would accept it more easily.

The voice had now fallen silent. I assumed that there was no more to say for the present. I took the hint. Now was the time for action. If the Naga, whoever or whatever they were, were marching on the cave right now, then there was no time to lose.

I took Tripod’s head into my hands and she looked soulfully into my eyes. There was such a bond between us now it was as if she could read my thoughts. “Look girl, there’s an important and dangerous thing I must do. I’ve got to go back out into the valley, but I want you to stay here”, I pointed at the floor of the cave where we were. “Stay here”, I repeated, “stay here, girl”. With that I backed away slowly with Tripod watching every step. But she stayed where she was and rested her head on her paws. With one last “good girl”, I turned and walked out into the sunlight.

I immediately put her out of my mind. There was a dangerous job to do and I wasn’t at all certain I would survive it. Firstly, I had neglected to mention to the Master of the Cave that I had never driven a bulldozer in my life. Too much crashing and banging about could easily trigger another rock-slide on the upper slopes and bring several more tons of rock crashing down on me.

Then there was the heart-stopping terror of the scorpion. Even at fifty feet away, the last time I had seen it I had been paralysed with fear. Heaven only knew what it would be like up close and personal. But it was no use theorising about what might happen. I was committed now and would have to go through with it.

The giant bulldozer was brand new, its bright red paintwork glistening in the morning sun. I climbed up onto the caterpillar tracks, using hand and footholds. The steel cabin had thick steel reinforcing beams running through its roof. The ‘glass’ windows were in fact reinforced plastic. I took some comfort from the knowledge that this cabin would give me some protection should the scorpion choose to attack.

Sitting in the driving seat I experienced the feeling that it was all coming back to me. But I had never been near such a bulldozer before in my life, so there was nothing to come back. I began to realise that it must be a result of some kind of conditioning I had received in the cave. At first unfamiliar controls suddenly seemed to be familiar and

obvious. I turned the ignition key in its lock, pressed down on the throttle, threw the machine into gear and, with a quick 'toot' on its steam whistle, ploughed forward towards the pile of rock.

It was all so very easy. Raising and lowering the enormous blade I chewed off a great swathe of boulders from the perimeter of the pile, then bit ever deeper into the mass. Soon there was just the grey monolith, lying sideways and completely blocking the mouth of the cave. In the gap between the monolith and the top of the entrance I could see the black pincers of the scorpion waving menacingly.

I paused, both to give the problem some thought as well as to gather myself against the coming ordeal. A push across the mouth of the cave would reveal the side of the cabin to the scorpion's first rush. A safer strategy would be to hook the great blade around the edge of the monolith and pull it out in reverse. Thus I would have the blade between me and the scorpion when it came out.

I hooked the blade around the edge and, with one final blast on the whistle, threw the machine into reverse. There was a deep, grating sound as the massive monolith was dragged across the ground, but this was drowned out by a shrill scream that could only have come from the scorpion. I sat transfixed as the monster trotted into view. Barely hesitating to get its bearings, it threw itself against the superstructure of the bulldozer.

It was the reinforcing bars that definitely saved me. The plastic windows shattered as the giant pincer claws smashed against them. In a move born of sheer desperation, I threw myself sideways clean out of the cabin, rolled across the caterpillar tracks and dropped smoothly down onto the rocky ground, out of sight of the scorpion.

Despite the danger of the situation, my mind was thinking clearly and rationally. As long as I had stayed inside the cabin the scorpion would not have picked up either on the pheromones or the compatible vibrations supposedly emanating from me. I would have to get out into the open for that. I would also have to get close.

The decision was contiguous with the action. I ran around the back of the bulldozer and out into the open. Raising my arms high in the air I roared at the top of my voice, all the while walking slowly towards the scorpion.

The scorpion paused from attacking the machine and turned its attention to this new distraction. It rotated its whole body, raised its pincers in the air and lowered what passed for its head to look at me. Multiple eyes, in several locations, swiveled to bring me into sharper focus. Masticating mandibles, running with some gooey saliva, danced in anticipation as they moved ever closer to their prey.

The sheer horror of the situation was completely overwhelming. I was literally rooted to the spot, too terrified to move. Somewhere a small, primal voice urged me to turn and run, but such action was beyond me. Like a rabbit in the head-lights, I awaited my awful fate.

Then the scorpion stopped. It lowered its head the more until it was barely three feet from me. At this distance I was aware of a forest of hair-like antennae, bristling around the mandibles. They all seemed to be vibrating at the same frequency. Then, very slowly, it lowered one great claw and touched me gently on the head. Whatever the result was, it seemed to satisfy the beast. With a shrug of its great body it gathered itself upwards and walked away towards the stream. I could understand its sentiments entirely. I also needed a drink, but it was of something far stronger than water.

I followed it to the stream and drank beside it. At times it turned to look at me again, but only, it seemed, out of curiosity. The beast had accepted me as one of its own. I had nothing to fear from it now.

As I walked back to the cave, the effects of the fear caught up with me. I began to tremble all over my body, to such an extent that my walking became erratic. However, I

had already accepted that I would have to go through the whole thing again with Tripod as soon as possible. Whilst the memory of me was still fresh in the creature's mind, I should introduce it to the dog. As intelligent and trusting of me as she was, I didn't fancy my chances of explaining it to her.

It was every bit as difficult as I had expected. She followed me out of the cave, but the minute she saw the scorpion out and walking about she yelped shrilly and ran back inside. Once again I brought her outside, but she outright refused to follow me towards the scorpion. I sat down and took her in my arms. "Look girl, you know I would never hurt you, or let anything else hurt you, don't you." My words seemed to calm her, but all the while I was talking she kept looking around. Every time she saw the scorpion a small whimper came from her.

"Come on girl", I said, picking her up in my arms. Looking straight into her eyes I continued, "Let's get this over with. I swear it won't hurt you."

As I walked towards the scorpion I could feel Tripod trembling in my arms. As I neared the monster it turned to give me its full attention. With the dog in my arms I just hoped it didn't think I was bringing it food.

Just as before the scorpion raised its claws and lowered its head. Once again its terrible maw loomed large before us, its whiskers vibrating frantically. Once more one claw descended slowly and gently touched Tripod on the head. And for the second time, what the creature sensed seemed to satisfy it. Then, losing interest in us both, it ambled off towards its cave.

If I had needed any further evidence of what an intelligent and perceptive dog Tripod was, her subsequent behavior would have given it to me. From that moment on she showed absolutely no fear of the scorpion. In fact, at times she positively harassed it, running through its legs and barking playfully. She even went in and explored its cave, something that I chose to pass on.

THE NAGA

I was feeling quite pleased with myself when I returned to the Cave of Light and its Master. However, if I had been expecting any praise I would have been disappointed. Instead he reminded me that my earlier interference had seriously delayed his long-standing plans to defend the valley and, of course, the Cave. He went to some lengths to explain the process of parthenogenesis or the reproductive system whereby scorpions breed. His intention was to create a scorpion army to do battle with the advancing Naga, but it took time.

Our scorpion was of the species that had no need of a mate to initiate the breeding process. She could fertilize her own eggs. Normal scorpions had litters of up to eight scorplings. This scorpion though was merely a construct of the Master's computer. It could be programmed to do whatever he wanted. He informed me that she could hatch fifty young a day. As the Naga were still ten days journey away, we would have an army of five hundred young scorpions to meet it. He also warned me that both Tripod and I must avoid the scorplings for the first few hours after their birth. At that stage their sensing systems were too immature to recognize either pheromones or vibrational signals. They would probably attack us both on sight.

I was encouraged by the fact that the Master condescended to discuss battle tactics with me. He said that the full thrust of the attack would come through the narrow valley that led to the entrance of the larger valley, Eden . Even if the Naga had managed to scale the sheer cliffs that surrounded Eden, there was some kind of force field that would prevent them from entering by that means. When I asked why he didn't just put a similar force field across the entrance he said it was all to do with the 'Old Laws' . Such a three hundred and sixty degree force field would seal us all inside it for eternity.

The narrow approach valley certainly made defence that much easier, especially as the Master had told me that the Naga would number about ten thousand. I remembered the story of the three hundred Spartans who kept a vastly superior enemy at bay as they tried to advance through a narrow pass. Out-numbered twenty to one, we would need some significant strategic advantage if we were to prevail.

It suddenly occurred to me that, even though we had been discussing the Naga, I didn't have the faintest idea what they looked like. So I asked the Master, and instantly regretted it. He brought up the advancing army on several of the screens in the Cave, then zoomed in very close.

It was something straight out of a nightmare. Once again I had to remind myself that I wasn't dreaming all this. It was so far outside the parameters of what I had previously thought to be normal that it beggared belief. It seemed that absolutely anything, however bizarre, could exist in this dimension.

The lead Naga was every bit as big as our mother scorpion. It looked like a cross between a Gila Monster and a Kyoto Dragon. Decidedly reptilian, its feet ended in viciously curved claws that looked like they could disembowel an elephant with one swipe. Massive yellow fangs ran the whole length of an elongated jaw. An armoured tail, easily as long as its body, completed a deadly fighting machine. Our mother scorpion would have its hands full in any battle with this monster.

Behind it came the serried ranks of smaller but identical creatures. Quite clearly they had been bred for battle by the same method as the Master had bred the scorplings. They silently marched ever onward, partially obscured by a great cloud of dust thrown up by their passing.

Suddenly a thought struck me. I addressed my question to the Master. "If our scorpion is too big to get out through the narrow entrance to the valley, how will the equally large lizard get in?"

"At the moment that is a mystery to me", intoned the voice. "The answer though may lie here." On several screens another view of the advancing army came up. A dozen of the smaller lizards were bound together in harness. Behind them they dragged a covered, wheeled wagon. Whatever it contained it was clearly very heavy. The lizards strained to drag it across the sandy terrain.

In the following days, the scorpion breeding program served to confine Tripod and myself to an ever-diminishing area of the valley. Fortunately, newly-born scorplings tended to stay very close to their mother for the first few hours. That didn't mean that Tripod and I didn't have to go through the trauma of repeated close inspection by six feet long, older scorplings. It was less stressful to stay in the immediate vicinity of the Cave of Light, about as far away from the scorpion's lair as it was possible to get.

Fortunately I did have the presence of mind to ask the Master for some kind of weapon that would deter, rather than kill, young scorplings. The result was a short cylinder, much like a flash-light, but, instead of a beam of light it threw a powerful sonic beam. It was completely soundless, but its effect on the scorplings was dramatic in the extreme.

I had been inside the Cave discoursing with the Master, when I heard Tripod barking frantically outside. I ran out to see a newly-born scorpling chasing her in circles, narrowly missing her with badly aimed thrusts of its stinging tail. The moment it saw me, it charged in my direction. I aimed the weapon at it and pressed a button. The scorpling instantly collapsed, writhing on the ground and emitting a high-pitched shriek. As I released the pressure on the button it sprang to its feet and ran at full tilt away from the Cave. No doubt Tripod could have done without the experience, but at least it showed us that the sonic beam weapon was highly effective.

The sonic weapon now allowed me a much greater degree of freedom of movement. I really needed to be out and about, planning the strategy of our defence. I felt the key to this was the narrow, steeply-sided valley that led to the entrance of our valley. I also felt that the steep sloping upwards of the narrow valley's floor as it approached Eden was an important factor too. But, for the moment, I couldn't figure out why.

For several hours Tripod and I wandered the length of the narrow approach valley. I estimated it to be about two miles long and fifteen feet wide at its narrowest point, culminating in the very narrow entrance to Eden which was only eight feet wide. It would be an almost impossibly tight fit for the adult Naga. It would struggle to pass the narrowest point, but would never pass the narrow entrance.

Examining the marching army closely on the screens, I saw that the young Naga were marching six abreast and very close together. This would reduce to about four or five abreast through the narrow valley. With each Naga being six feet long, I estimated that, by the time the first Naga reached the entrance to Eden, there would be about eight thousand Naga crammed into the narrow valley.

On closer examination the obvious solution wasn't obvious at all. We could pack the overhanging cliffs with explosives and detonate them. This would collapse the cliffs onto the valley, completely burying eight thousand of the Naga under thousands of tons of rock. The problem with this was that we would also be ensuring that we would never leave Eden again. Even the massive bulldozer wouldn't be able to force a path through. Failing all else, it would save the Cave of Light and the Master, so perhaps we would have to place the explosives just in case, but I continued to wrack my brains for a better solution.

For a long while I sat in the shade of a large boulder, staring at the sheer walls of the valley. Mostly they were out of focus, because my mind was on other things. It was as I came out of one period of intense thought that I found I was looking at one of the deep fissures that occasionally ran from top to bottom of the cliffs. I knew that it rarely rained here, but when it did I could visualize the rain being channeled downwards through the fissures. It was this that gave me the idea.

It was only on the final day before the arrival of the first Naga that I realized the scorpion had a strategy all of its own. It had lined up the five hundred scorplings in three ranks about two hundred yards inside Eden, right across its breadth. Then, like some insect general, it paraded up and down the ranks, in the space between them and the entrance. At times it stood before the army and raised its pincers high in the air. Five hundred scorplings did likewise. Then they all thrashed their tails back and forth in unison.

Needless to say, there was no role for either Tripod or myself in the scorpion's battle plan. Quite clearly, it thought that victory or defeat depended solely on itself. I wasn't surprised to find that the Master thought the same. He went along with all my plans without question, although I got the impression that he was only humouring me.

The reason was revealed when I asked about the wisdom of the scorpion not starting its defence of Eden right up close to the narrow entrance. Surely, I argued, the latter was Eden's greatest strategic advantage. From his explanation, it all came down to the 'Old Laws' again. The giant scorpion was the creation of the Master of the Cave of Light. Similarly, the giant Naga was the creation of the Master of the Cave of Darkness, its mirror opposite. Thus both creatures were the champions of their respective Masters. Before the great body of the battle commenced, these two champions would do individual battle between the two armies.

I had set up a kind of command post on a raised mound just outside the entrance to the Cave of Light. Not only did I have a clear view of all of Eden from here, I could also quickly pop back inside the Cave, either to watch other developments on the screens or to ask questions of the Master.

As the first ranks of the Naga reached the entrance to the narrow valley they stopped. I watched closely as the screens zoomed in close to pick up the action. The giant Naga had stepped to one side and was waving one massive paw at the column. From out of the ranks came the dozen Naga in harness, dragging the covered, wheeled wagon. As they entered the narrow valley, the giant Naga fell in behind them. In its wake came the rest of the Naga army.

I experienced a terrible feeling of inevitability as this waking nightmare forged its way ever deeper into the valley. What could possibly stop it? The giant scorpion and its five hundred young seemed almost puny by comparison. And the closer the Naga got, the more I could feel their psychic energy. It blanketed my mind with a wave of despair and horror that was nearly tangible. I had to mentally fight it off with all my strength even to think clearly. I realized that this was also part of the battle.

Throughout all this, Tripod was an absolute tower of strength. Whenever she saw the oppressive energies bearing down on me, she was constantly by my side, often rubbing herself up against my legs. As I looked down she would stare into my eyes as if to say that she would be there to support me. The Naga's psychic energies seemed to have no effect on her.

I watched closely on the screens as the advancing column reached the narrow-point of the valley. The dozen Naga un-harnessed themselves from the wagon and moved out of its way. With one sweep of its paw the giant Naga removed the cover from the wagon,

then it too stood aside. The screens zoomed in close to examine what the wagon had been carrying.

At first it was quite confusing. Glinting dully in the sunlight stood a large, tracked vehicle reminiscent of the base of a tank. Folded across the top was some kind of superstructure, the purpose of which was presently indiscernible. With a cough, then a roar, its engine started and the tracked vehicle rolled forward, off the wagon and onto the sandy floor of the valley. With mounting anticipation I waited for the next stage.

Suddenly there was a squealing sound as a large, rectangular steel block rose up from inside the vehicle. It rotated through ninety degrees until it stood upright on the chassis, then stopped. But there was more to come. From either side of the block, two massive arms extended. At the end of each arm were two equally massive cutting blades. Then from behind the block arose a long, steel arm, at the extremity of which was fixed a massive steel ball. If there was still any doubt about the machine's function, these were soon dispelled as it began to work.

The tracked base brought it close to the narrow-point. The blades at the end of the two arms started to rotate at high speed. There was a shrieking sound and a cloud of dust as the blades bit into the surrounding rock. At intervals they retracted as the massive steel ball whipped over, pulverizing any remaining rock. I watched in open-mouthed amazement as this mother of all rock-drilling machines proceeded at walking pace through solid rock.

Within barely five minutes it had cleared the narrow-point and the machine moved onwards. Behind it followed the Naga. Quite clearly, the narrow entrance to Eden would prove to be no barrier to the advancing army now. So much for my 'three hundred Spartans' strategy, I concluded. I could only hope that the Naga had no more nasty surprises in store for us.

The machine reached the narrow entrance to Eden and repeated the previous procedure. It opened up a gap that was easily thirty feet across. It then retreated to let the giant Naga pass. Tossing its head and roaring loudly, it entered Eden, stopping one hundred yards inside to confront the giant scorpion. Barely eighty yards now separated them.

But there was still some ritual to be played out. Behind the giant Naga several hundred of the young Naga filed into Eden, forming a semi-circle behind it. Thus the two contenders stood, surrounded by their respective armies.

The giant Naga roared again and stamped its feet. Behind it several hundred followers did likewise. Not to be outdone, the giant scorpion raised both claws, thrashed its tail backwards and forwards and emitted a high-pitched shriek. The five hundred scorpings did the same. Then the two giants launched themselves at each other.

I had been watching all this from my command post close to the Cave. I was confident that the attention of both armies was now firmly concentrated on the battle between the two giants. I guessed there would be no interference from either side until this part of the ritual was decided. And no doubt it was all decreed by the 'Old Laws'. But as far as I was concerned, a strategic advantage of surprise was to be fully taken advantage of, 'Old Laws' or no 'Old Laws'. I immediately put the next stage of my plan into action.

The upper reaches of the cliffs overhanging the narrow approach valley had been liberally mined with explosives, but this was the Armageddon option. I had something just as deadly for the Naga army, without equally deadly consequences for us.

At regular intervals along the approach valley the cliffs were marked by deep fissures similar to the one I had gazed at and imagined rain-water running down it. With the assistance of the Master I had positioned giant camouflaged bowsers of gasoline at the top of each fissure. From a remote control button at the command post I now opened the

outflow valve of each bowser simultaneously. Thousand of gallons of gasoline poured out, into the fissures and down the cliffs.

There was always the danger that the Naga army, crammed into the narrow valley, would know what gasoline was. However, as they stood ankle-deep in the stuff, made immobile by their fellows in front and behind, there was very little they could do about it. They were well and truly trapped as the gasoline continued to pour out.

Meanwhile, a titanic struggle was ensuing in the arena that was Eden. The first rush of the Naga was batted aside by the pincers of the scorpion. It paused, then rushed in again, but the claws were too quick for it. Another resounding blow alongside its head sent it sprawling. It paused, clearly revising its strategy. Encouraged, the scorpion rushed forward. The next bit happened so fast that it was almost too quick to follow. The Naga made to advance, then stopped abruptly. Moving its feet surprisingly quickly for such a big creature it rotated its body rapidly. The armoured tail swung viciously in a tight arc.

The scorpion saw it coming but its forward momentum carried it into the swinging tail. There was a resounding 'crack' as its two front legs were shattered. With a shriek, it pitched forward onto its under-belly.

Sensing victory, the Naga raced in for the kill, but the scorpion was far from finished. As the Naga closed in the scorpion seized it with both claws. With a twist of its body it turned the Naga on its back then rolled on top of it. Realising the danger, the Naga screamed in terror. It thrashed from side to side, but the weight of the scorpion was too much to dislodge. Raising itself up on its remaining legs, the scorpion struck down with its stinging tail, right into the un-armoured throat of the Naga.

The pain and the terror gave force to the reflex action. A giant paw managed to bat the scorpion away. It rolled and regained its feet, just as the Naga regained its feet too. It stood there, unsteady, a great swelling rising visibly on its neck as the poison did its work. It was finished and the scorpion knew it as it closed in for the kill.

I took this as my cue. Within seconds this battle would be over and the larger battle would begin. But first I had to balance the odds.

I walked briskly from my command post and approached the rear of the lines of young scorpions. I had practiced this several times, so I knew exactly what I was doing. By my side I held a flare gun, the type they use in rescues. Aiming it carefully I pulled the trigger. There was a burst of flame as the flare arced over both opposing groups and fell several yards inside the approach valley.

Instantly, a thunderous explosion shook the ground and a sheet of flame shot out into Eden, knocking everyone off their feet. Jumping up I ran to survey the screens in the Cave. Sure enough, just as planned, the whole length of the approach valley was a raging inferno. Through the flames and smoke it was possible to see individual Naga thrashing in their death throes. In vain, several tried to scale the steep slopes, only to fall back into the flames. It was a total rout. Decimated and now leaderless, the remaining thousand or so Naga who had been waiting to enter the approach valley turned tail and fled into the desert. I returned my attention to the action in Eden.

The scorpion had the Naga on its back and was hitting it with sting after sting. Completely paralysed now, all the Naga could do was lie there. Previously tense, it suddenly slumped. Quite clearly it was dead.

As if this was a signal, the remaining Naga surged forward, intent on avenging their leader's death. Simultaneously, the scorpions rushed to meet them, enthused by their champion's victory. Although greatly outnumbered, they ploughed into the ranks of the Naga. Even though severely injured, the mother scorpion plunged into the melee too.

The smaller Naga were no contest. The great claws crushed them then tossed them aside.

Well aware that the Master would be watching on the screens, I wanted to be seen to be playing my part. I rushed amongst the battling monsters, wielding the sonic weapon. If it had been effective against the scorplings it was absolutely devastating to the Naga. They immediately went into spasm, falling to the ground unconscious in a quivering heap. The scorplings soon got the drift of it. Several took to following me about. Then, as the Naga fell unconscious, they would run in and sting them in their unprotected necks. It was a massacre. Soon every last Naga lay paralysed or dead.

I have never been one for complacency. Perhaps having suffered from continuous misfortune for so long I had become a confirmed pessimist. Despite the forest of flames in the approach valley, I still kept a wary eye on the entrance, just in case something still alive managed to get through. Thus it was I who saw the machine first.

Blackened by smoke, but otherwise undamaged, the drilling machine edged into Eden. The base turned first right then left, as if to get its bearings. Then it headed directly towards the Cave of Light. I guessed its intent immediately. If it reached the Cave, then our victory against the Naga would be as nothing. Its drilling arms would reduce the Cave to rubble. It had to be stopped.

Realizing the danger, the scorplings threw themselves at it, but even the giant claws of the mother had no effect on the hardened steel. Brushing them aside and sometimes crushing them under its base, the machine doggedly forged a path towards the Cave. With a growing feeling of despair, I feared it was unstoppable.

Suddenly I remembered the giant bulldozer. I sprinted across to where it still stood, close to the scorpion's cave. Clambering aboard, I keyed it into life. Paying no heed to anything that might be in the way, I roared across the valley, crushing several scorplings in the process. The machine was just ascending the mound outside the Cave when I caught up with it.

A side-ways swipe with the great blade was enough to send it turning end over end. Without hesitation, I scooped it up and ran the bulldozer at full tilt towards the nearest cliff-face. The impact shook the bulldozer to the core. I saw cracks appear all over the engine cowling. The effect on the machine was entirely more dramatic. The tracks ruptured from the base and the superstructure was crushed inwards upon itself. Several times I reversed backwards and forwards until it was just a crumpled bundle of steel. One bladed arm continued to spin, but the machine was going nowhere. The attack of the Naga was over.

Our casualties were minimal, a few score dead scorplings and their mother with two broken front legs. The Naga had lost over nine thousand dead with the remnants, another thousand, scattered in the desert. Eden however was devastated. Most of the greenery had been trampled to the ground and the area close to the entrance was badly burned. I did mention to the Master that I would have a lot of work to do with the bulldozer. He told me not to bother as he would reform the whole valley that very night. He cautioned that Tripod and I should not leave the Cave of Light until day-break.

Despite being deep in the Cave, the thunder was like an artillery barrage. Such were the concussions that the very rock beneath us seemed to shake. Sheet lightning, sometimes forking in all directions, lit the Cave from one end to the other. The sound of torrential rain could be heard throughout the hours of darkness. There could be little doubt that Eden was taking an elemental battering.

Eventually I slept. I awoke to dawn's early light filtering through the mouth of the Cave. With Tripod by my side I emerged to see what wonders had been wrought. I was not to be disappointed.

Eden stood exactly as I had first seen it. Trees and flowering plants bloomed in wild profusion again. Small animals ran through the under-growth, and myriad birds soared above. The stream was pristine, the fish swimming in shoals. The mother scorpion was out and about, her front legs completely mended. There was no sign however of the scorpplings.

The Master had never been too free with his praise for me, but the next time we spoke he was almost effusive. He commended me on my plan with the gasoline, even if he did chide me for being in violation of the spirit if not the word of the Old Laws.' for not waiting until the contest between the two champions was over. He saved special praise for my destroying the drilling machine with the bulldozer. No doubt there was a certain degree of self-interest here. If it had got into the Cave it would have been the end of him.

I thought I'd take advantage of the situation by asking him if I could expect to find Janice in this dimension. After all, I explained, that was the sole reason for my coming here. His demeanor changed immediately.

"You humans are so obsessed by such things", he raged. "If you could ignore the corporeal just for one moment, you just might progress on the spiritual level. The problem starts in late childhood as you come to realize the inevitability of death. You then forge romantic alliances with other humans to try to give yourselves some degree of permanency in the material world. That such alliances are inherently impermanent themselves seems to escape you. Then you try to dignify the whole charade by calling it 'love'. Pah", his rage turned to exasperation.

"So you find no merit at all in love?" I challenged.

"Not to the exclusion of everything else", came the riposte. "I and the rest of my kind rose above such things many eons ago. Our only goal is to pursue the fight against evil and evil-doers. This is the only fitting work for the higher intellect."

I allowed the tirade to wash over me. No doubt such a superior intellectual entity like the Master could rise above things such as love. But for us mere mortals, whilst we might aspire to the divine, the spirit was willing but the flesh was inevitably weak. I would embrace my love for Janice like a creed. At the moment it was all that was keeping me going.

"Anyway", continued the Master, interrupting my train of thought, "you still have not proved yourself worthy of great challenges. You performed passably well in the recent encounter with the Naga, but there is a greater challenge for you. Now that the Dark Master has attacked me, I must balance the symmetry and attempt to destroy him. I must build a scorpion army and you must lead it to the 'Cave of Darkness' where the Dark Master resides. It is a long journey, beset by many dangers. You will be tested to the full. Your every weakness will be exploited unmercifully."

"I'm ready", I interrupted, "when do we leave?"

"Quiet", boomed the Master. "I will tell you when you are ready. I will tell you when you will leave. There is much preparation to be done. It will take several weeks to generate an army of two thousand young scorpions. During that time you must work on your weaknesses."

"Which ones?" I responded, realising that my question might sound facetious.

"Why, your dark soul", the Master's voice was almost a whisper. "Have you forgotten the two people you murdered? Has it slipped from your mind? The Dark Master won't have forgotten. He will exploit it to the full. He will attempt to empower that dark side. He will offer you great wealth and power. Though you claim to have imprisoned 'The Beast', even now it strains to be free. If you are ever to break free of the eternal,

negative cycle of violent death followed by re-incarnation at the exact, same starting point in the desert, you need to positively charge your soul.”

“I can control ‘The Beast’”, I asserted. “It won’t take me over.”

“So you say”, the tone was skeptical, “but it did so before and with such disastrous consequences. You still do not realise how powerful a dark spirit you are. In some ways that makes you a very potent warrior for my cause. To have such a balance of good and evil in one soul is extremely unusual. But there are dangers for me. Should the Dark Master manage to empower your dark side, you could become a very powerful ally for him. It could tip the balance in the war between us. Darkness could come to triumph over Light. So this is a very dangerous gamble I am taking.”

“You have to trust me”, my reply was halfway between a statement and a plea.

“Yes, I will have to trust you, won’t I?” replied the Master, “but it is more than good intentions that I want from you. You must try to be more aware. Spiritually aware. Try to see beyond the external form. In this dimension you still see things as you want to see them. It is yourself who colours the reality. You choose to see the guardian as a scorpion, exactly as you chose to see the Naga as reptilian dragons. In your journey to the Cave of Darkness you will see many things in many forms. That is where the danger lies for you. Seemingly harmless and positive things may harbor great danger for you. Similarly, seemingly dark and negative things may aid your cause. It is up to you. You must be on your guard at all times. Always, you must look beyond the exterior form. Always, you must be guided by the spirit.”

“I will try.”

“Yes, I don’t doubt that you will. That is why I am putting my trust in you”, the Master’s tone was softer now. “Once you are in the realm of Darkness, you are beyond my help. You will first come to The Web, which circles and protects the City of Darkness and ultimately the Cave of Darkness and the Dark Master. You will have the sonic weapon that I gave you for protection. But your real protection will be your spiritual sight. Your psychic ability to recognize friend or foe. In the time that is left before you must leave, study the scorpion closely. Try to see it through spiritual eyes. Try to discern its true, universal reality.”

“Is that all I can do to prepare myself? I queried. “And what will I do when I get to the Cave of Darkness?”

“If you can master that, it will be enough”, came the answer. “As for your second question, you will be carrying with you perhaps the most powerful weapon in the universe, the Seed of Light. This element is trillions of times more powerful than plutonium. You must release it in the Cave of Darkness. The Seed feeds off darkness and evil and is greatly empowered by it. It is also unstoppable. Once the reaction has begun, it will destroy the realm of Darkness in this dimension.”

“And how do I carry this Seed of Light?” I asked.

There was a pause before the Master answered, as if he was considering carefully what to say. “It is only small, no larger than one of your Earth’s chicken’s eggs. But it will be contained within a small, lead casket to protect you from its radiation. Once in the Cave of Darkness you must remove it from the casket. The Seed will do the rest.”

The answer prompted my next question. “And what will be the effect on me when I remove it from the casket”

There was no pause before the Master answered this time. “You will be exposed to a fatal dose of radiation. Your death will not be immediate. You will have time to make the journey back to the Cave of Light.”

“So it’s a suicide mission”, my words were more statement than question.

“Yes”, came the response, “a suicide mission, just like the one that brought you to this dimension in the first place.”

If I had been considering a complaint, the answer put paid to that. All things considered, it was a fitting end to the conversation.

THE REALM OF DARKNESS

For several hours each day I took to studying the scorpion closely. But not too closely, because she was in the business of mass producing young scorpions. In batches of fifty they marched out of her cave and into the narrow valley. There were too many to stay in Eden so they were assembling in the desert outside. On the one hand it was good not to be continuously confronted by curious young scorpions. On the other, it meant that the newly born and dangerous scorpings didn't stay by their mother, but were constantly in transit across Eden.

I managed to find a spot in the shade that wasn't on the transit route. With the sonic weapon still at hand though, I tried to meditate and study the mother scorpion at the same time. I cast my mind back to the prison years and the many long months I had spent in solitary confinement. The unquiet spirit, panicking at the prospect of extreme sensory deprivation. The knowledge that the mind would ultimately crack in the face of indefinite solitude, but the rationale that life was the only game in town.

I calmed my mind and slowed my heartbeat. A great feeling of stillness settled over me. I went to that small place in my psyche where I used to retreat to escape the pain of a meaningless existence. I examined 'The Beast' and marveled at its power. I fortified my will to better contain it and rested strong in the knowledge that I was ultimately in control.

I tried experimenting with focus. I would stare hard at the scorpion, then draw back so that it became merely a blur. It was in this latter state that I began to have glimpses of something else. Mostly it was just a shadow within the mist, with neither shape nor substance. Very occasionally I thought I did see something. The hard, outer reality that was the scorpion seemed to fall away revealing what had to be its true essence, perhaps its soul. Maybe it was just a trick of vision or merely my imagination, but I thought I saw an angelic figure. It was an image so full of Christian symbolism, but at the same time such a cliché. It was only there for a fleeting moment, then dissolved into the mist again. However, in retrospect, I was sure that I saw it.

Questions to the Master were unhelpful. He kept returning to the theme that I would see things as I chose to see them and it was a waste of time his trying to interpret them for me. The crux of it was that I would have to find out for myself.

I did ask who was in charge of the expedition, the scorpion or myself. The answer to that was ambiguous too. Unlike myself, the scorpion knew the way to the City of Darkness, so it would lead. Further, in all battle situations involving the scorpions, the mother scorpion would act as general. It was only with regard to when or where to release the Seed that I would make the decision. So any romantic notion I might have entertained of my leading the crusade against the forces of darkness was quickly extinguished. All the important decisions would be made by a giant insect!

Nevertheless, as the day of our departure approached I did find that I was growing more and more excited. Partly it was the boredom of sitting about all day doing virtually nothing. But there was also the feeling that I was embarking on a great adventure, one that might have lasting implications for mankind. I might be going to my death, but at least I would be striking a blow against the forces of darkness in general as well as that particular demon who had destroyed my Janice.

The enforced idleness had brought Tripod and I ever closer together, if that was possible. I played with her, much like anyone would play with their dog, but it was something more. We were constant companions and soul mates. Many hours were spent just sitting close together, without saying anything. At times when I was talking to her she stared knowingly into my eyes as if she fully understood what I was saying. This

brought me to consider leaving her behind so as to keep her safe, but I knew she would never stand for it and would follow me anyway. Then there was the fact that I had come to rely on her instincts in dangerous situations.

The Master had emphasised that he wouldn't be able to help me at all once I was in the realm of darkness. He suggested that I give careful consideration to what I might need on the journey and tell him now. He said that he would construct a wheeled wagon. I was thinking of something much like the wagon the Naga had brought the drilling machine on.

The Master however, constructed a wondrous machine that was part lorry part dune buggy. The upper part was box-shaped, much like any normal lorry. This was split into two compartments, the first refrigerated for the food, the second to store the weapons and any other kit we might need. The front of the vehicle included an air-conditioned cab with a curved wind-screen that gave a panoramic view of all before it. The roof and sides of the lorry were covered with solar panels and the whole contraption was carried on eight sets of double wheels, fitted with massively ridged tires. Finally, there was a bulldozer-type blade at the front, no doubt intended to push any obstacles out of the way.

When it came to deciding what kit to take with us, I knew I had my work cut out. Just on the basis of what I had seen in my time in this new dimension, I fully realised that I could be confronted by absolutely anything on the journey. To cover every eventuality I could fill a freight train with things, but, with space at a premium, I would just have to take the essentials.

The encounter with the scorpion still firmly in my mind, I insisted on a flame-thrower and several tanks of fuel. Next came rocket launchers, explosives, detonators and hand grenades. I also asked for a laser canon, not really knowing if such a thing existed, but guessing that the Master's technology could supply it. I then envisioned a situation where hi-tech weapons wouldn't function and requested a cross-bow and dozens of wooden quarrels.

Just in case either Tripod or I were injured, I requisitioned a good first aid kit and blood for us both. I also asked for a compass, binoculars, rope, flare gun and flares, radiation tablets and a Geiger counter. For good measure I ordered up a GPS, but was told that the smothering negative etheric energy in the realm of darkness suppressed all signals.

Needless to say, another session in the Master's learning beam was needed. The surprise though was that the Master insisted that Tripod experience it too. Perhaps this should have alerted me to something significant. In the event, I didn't give it much thought, although for the life of me I couldn't envision Tripod either driving the truck or using the rocket launcher!

My final session with the Master before leaving was memorable if only for his lack of emotion. From his demeanour you could have been forgiven for thinking that I was setting out on some holiday excursion rather than on a life or death crusade to save mankind from the forces of darkness. He cautioned me to be forever on my guard and not to take anything at face value. He especially emphasised that I must use my newly acquired skill of looking beyond the outer form and identifying the substance within. He warned me about being sentimental either for Tripod's safety or my own. In the final analysis, he stated, we were both expendable in pursuit of the greater goal of defeating the forces of evil.

"Much depends on you, Norman", he intoned in his most sepulchral voice. "At the moment you stand condemned before the world for the terrible sins you have committed

in the past. See if you can rise above that. See if you can really turn your heart around. Your destiny and that of many others lies in your own hands. Now go.”

And that was that. If I had been waiting for him to wish me good luck, then I would have waited in vain. I could only conclude that, higher race or not, the absence of warmth, emotion and love was a definite failing.

As dawn broke over Eden we set out on our journey. With the giant scorpion in the lead and us in the dune buggy immediately behind, we entered the narrow valley, which was exactly as it was before, except that the narrow points were no longer there.

Twenty minutes later we emerged into the wider desert. A thousand young scorpions, standing in ranks three deep, emitted a shrill cry in unison as we came into view. The mother scorpion stood in front of them as Tripod and I walked the length of the ranks to allow the scorpions to switch on to our pheromones and vibrations. Then they formed up four abreast behind the dune buggy and, in the early morning sun-light, this bizarre column snaked its way across the sandy terrain.

Once again I had to do a reality check to remind myself that I wasn't dreaming it all. In a world where the weird had become commonplace, the mind had to struggle to comprehend what was normal in any absolute sense. In truth, one just had to deal with the reality of the moment and delay all judgment for later.

As the sun rose ever higher along with the temperature, I was glad of the protection provided by the air-conditioned cab. The giant scorpion plodded onwards, seemingly impervious to the conditions. The scorpion column behind were similarly unperturbed, marching through the cloud of dust thrown up by our passing.

I had been aware of the old maxim that an army marches on its stomach. What I wasn't aware of was that this applied to our insect army too. Whilst we were in Eden, feeding them was never a problem. There the Master kept them all charged with positive etheric energy. Out in the desert though this wasn't possible. They had to have real food. So three times a day the Master manifested a disgusting mess of insect larvae, which the scorpions fell on like ravening beasts. Even this would cease several days before we reached the City of Darkness. Thus not only would our scorpions want to kill the enemy, they would want to eat them!

Although the scorpions could stand marching all day in the almost unbearable heat, they too needed to rest. So at night we would halt during the hours of darkness. I would power down the lorry and Tripod and I would sit in the cool night air, eating our evening meal. On the very first night I noticed that, far off in the distance in the direction we were travelling, there was a luminous green glow low down in the sky. We were beyond contact with the Master, so there was no one to ask for a reason. However, even with my limited knowledge of radiation, the cause was quite obvious. This was confirmed by readings from the Geiger counter. Subsequent days proved that the closer we got to the luminosity, the higher were the readings. It prompted me to start taking the anti-radiation tablets and to give them to Tripod too. It also confirmed in me the inescapable fact that I was indeed on a suicide mission.

Ten days out, the scorpions' food stopped appearing. Two days later some began collapsing and dying in the sand. Fortunately there were some positive signs. Quite abruptly the remains of a tarmac, six lane highway appeared out of the desert. It was still occasionally blocked by dunes, but at least our progress was smoother and faster, the bulldozer blade of the lorry forging an easy path through the sand.

With the advent of the highway came various lop-sided and broken road signs. The places and destinations were unknown to me, but it was all clearly American. By now we could also see the shattered remains of buildings in the distance. A final sign saying

that we were twenty miles from Houston confirmed that we were approaching the remains of that former great city.

The mother scorpion had never once faltered, following her unerring instinct for direction. So I guessed that Houston must be our destination, although I couldn't recall any disaster that had befallen that city in my time as a mortal on earth. But from the evidence of the luminosity at night and the increasing radiation readings, I could only conclude that some nuclear catastrophe had struck the city. Perhaps in this parallel dimension there was a different history for the same places.

By now, our scorpion army was in dire straits. Driven mad by hunger, some had taken to cannibalism, killing and eating their weaker comrades. Not only didn't the mother scorpion do anything to stop this, she fully participated and even encouraged the practice. As abhorrent as it was to me, it did have a sound underlying logic. Further, as there was nothing I could do to stop it, I dismissed it from my mind, whilst praying that we would reach our destination very soon. One practical effect of this was to confine Tripod and myself to the cabin of the lorry, lest we too became food for the scorpions.

As we reached the outskirts of the city proper, it became abundantly clear why the Master had spoken of The Web. Strung between every broken building, every street sign, every traffic signal and every telegraph pole was a thick covering of spider's webs. In most places they were several webs thick, so that to break through one web would only lead to being confronted by another. This extended network of webs served to provide an impenetrable barrier all around the outskirts of the city. The individual webs were definitely the handiwork of spiders, but the general plan of providing a barrier to entry spoke of a higher intelligence entirely.

The mother scorpion and the rest of the army had come to an abrupt halt. It seemed that even they were deterred by the threat of 'The Web'. With the sonic weapon in my hand and one eye firmly on the scorpions I climbed down from the cab of the lorry.

Up close and personal 'The Web' was even more daunting. Among the tangled mass of the webs could be discerned the skeletal remains of earlier victims. Hopelessly entrapped by the sticky skeins they had waited helplessly until the spider came. Then it injected them with poison that dissolved their internal organs, before eating them. I could only reflect on what a nightmare world was the one that insects inhabited.

Nightmare or no, it was clearly up to me to deal with it. As I rummaged amongst the various weapons in the back compartment of the lorry I tried to gauge which one was appropriate. In truth, I suppose I was looking for an excuse to fire them all.

The rocket launcher was relatively straightforward to operate and extremely portable. I loaded a rocket into the tube and fired it. It went clean through several layers of web, leaving just a small hole where it had passed. Quite obviously, I wouldn't get anywhere with the RPG.

I threw several hand grenades, but they had a similar effect. The web wasn't substantial enough to be affected by the blast and the shards of metal only served to riddle the web with small holes.

I had already tried the sonic weapon up close upon a strand of a web and it had no effect whatsoever, so I passed on using the sonic canon. Which just left the flame-thrower.

The training lesson has stressed the dangers of starting a large conflagration that could quickly burn out of control. In attempting to destroy say a machine gun post one could easily destroy a whole city block or even the city itself. However, from brief glimpses of the city beyond 'The Web' it didn't look like there was much else left to burn that hadn't already been incinerated. Turning the fuel nozzle down to minimum, I fired a short burst at the piece of web that stretched across the highway we had come in on.

The flame arced out and struck the web. The effect was much the same as a match on a pair of nylons. There was a brief flare of flame, quickly extinguished, then the material of the web shrunk back, leaving a large round hole that stretched right across the highway. We had our way through.

We had also stirred up a veritable hornet's nest. Seconds after the hole appeared the surrounding skeins of the web started to vibrate violently. I could only conclude that something or some things were headed our way.

Suddenly, from every direction on the web, great spiders, fully six feet across, raced into view. They slowed as they came to the hole in the web, then milled about in some confusion. By now I had retired to the comparative safety of the lorry cab. The scorpions though had advanced to the fringes of 'The Web'.

As the spiders saw the scorpions, it was as if they had recovered their purpose. Perhaps they thought that the scorpions were prey who had somehow fallen out of the web. They raced down the web and across the ground towards them. To the scorpions it must have seemed that lunch was coming to them on legs. They shrieked in unison, then fell on the advancing spiders like the voracious, demented creatures they were.

Even by insect standards it was a gruesome spectacle. Sharp, pincer claws sliced into soft spider under-bellies as the scorpions stung the spiders into instant paralysis. Then, ignoring the vain attempts of other spiders to injure them, the scorpions started to feed.

A thousand spiders died and were in the process of being dismembered before the rest fled to the safety of 'The Web'. The scorpions were far too preoccupied to pursue them. They stayed to gorge on the dead.

With every spider in the vicinity dead and our scorpions fully fed, I descended from the cab. I could see clearly through the great hole in 'The Web' and right down the highway we were on. 'The Web' had been a barrier only to protect the outskirts of the city. Beyond this perimeter there were no webs visible across the streets. I judged that it was safe to proceed.

Just as I made to clamber back into the cab, I heard a strange sound. 'The Web' was vibrating again, but this time it was a deep, thrumming sound and the skeins of the web began to shake even more violently than before. The mother scorpion heard it too. She turned to try to ascertain its source. Even to the inexperienced ear it sounded like something big was coming.

Then, high up in 'The Web', a dark shadow appeared. Something quite enormous was descending the inside of 'The Web', its bulky mass largely obscured by several thicknesses of web. Surprisingly athletic for such a big creature, it leapt the last fifty feet to the ground. As it turned and peered through the hole we had made, we were confronted by an absolute monster of a spider.

It was thirty feet across and easily twenty feet high. Jet black in colour, it bristled with thick black hairs which covered its eight legs and massive body. Eyes on stalks swiveled to focus on us as its sectioned mouth masticated an invisible prey. Below its abdomen hung a thick appendage that could only have been some kind of stinger. If it was a creation of the Dark Master, then it was something straight from hell. I stood rigid with shock, trying to gauge whether I had time to reach the safety of the cab.

Fortunately for me, when it came to hellish appearances, our mother scorpion was no amateur. Not in the slightest deterred, she shrieked and ran through the hole at the spider. Taken by surprise, the latter backed up rapidly. Then, in the large municipal square that fate had chosen as their battleground, they began to circle each other warily.

It soon became apparent that the spider had a decided advantage in speed and manoeuvrability. It raced around the scorpion, one instant on the ground, the next up the

side of a tall building. It was enough to make one dizzy just trying to follow its progress. The scorpion though, seemed to take it all in its stride. As rapidly as its bulk would allow, it rotated in a tight circle, all the while keeping its eyes on the spider.

Having witnessed the battle between the Naga lizard and our mother scorpion I was rapidly becoming something of an expert on titanic clashes. Not as expert as the protagonists, who's very lives depended on the outcome, but certainly experienced enough to judge tactics and relative strengths.

The spider had a profound problem. It might have a considerable edge in speed and versatility, but its soft body was extremely vulnerable. It did have the poisonous stinger, but the scorpion was so well-armoured, that unless the spider could turn it on its back, it would be extremely difficult to strike a deadly blow. And the spider realised this better than anyone or anything present. Ergo the racing around, up and down tall buildings.

The knowledge gave the scorpion the considerable advantage of not having to fear the spider. It was reflected in increasingly bold thrusts at it as it raced past. One savage lunge with a pincer claw narrowly missed the great body, but succeeded in snagging one of the spider's legs, which was immediately torn off. This then was to be the scorpion's strategy. Within a very short space of time the spider was down to just four legs. Its gait was now lop-sided; its speed seriously compromised.

The end was as inevitable as it was dramatic. Suddenly the scorpion managed to grasp the great body with both claws. Then, holding the spider tightly, it drove its stinging tail deep into the spider's back. So confident was the scorpion of the outcome that it released the spider. It wobbled unsteadily on its remaining four legs before paralysis sent it crashing to the ground.

As if this was a signal to the watching and waiting scorpion hordes, they surged through the hole in the web and proceeded to eat the giant spider alive. The mother scorpion had now lost all interest in the proceedings and came to stand behind the lorry. To me this indicated that not only was the contest over, but that in future I would take the lead in the lorry.

I drove through the hole in the web, with the scorpion close behind. I had worked out that our destination must lie at the city centre, so it was just a question of following the great highway and what road signs there were left. Perhaps nine hundred young scorpplings were left alive. They formed into a column six abreast and marched along behind us.

Although quite clear of sand now, the great highway was constantly blocked by burnt out vehicles and fallen masonry. The bulldozer blade on the front of the lorry served to push all obstacles out of our path. The further we proceeded the greater was the devastation. Soon everything we passed had been leveled to the ground. Remains that were earlier just scorched or partially burned were now reduced to cinders. A thick layer of grey ash lay over everything. Quite clearly, we were nearing the epi-centre of what had certainly been a nuclear explosion.

As grim as the surroundings were, it was a beautiful summer's day and the sun was shining brightly rather than burning relentlessly. With our scorpion army safely fed I felt that I could relax our personal security a tad. I lowered the driver's window of the cab to take advantage of the fresh breeze. That was how I came to hear the singing first.

We were just breasting the brow of a steep hill. Somewhere beyond the top the highway dropped from view. It was from here that the strange sound was coming. I listened more closely.

In a charred landscape free of any living thing there was no background noise anyway, so any sound would have stood out. This sound though was highly pitched and musical.

It was un-mistakably made by children's voices singing in unison. And many hundreds of them too.

I stopped the lorry, so bringing the column to a halt. I opened the door of the cab and stood on the running board so that I would have a clearer view. The singing was much louder now and the children much closer. I strained my eyes to peer at the brow of the hill.

A tall, slender figure came into view, dressed all in white. A white headdress and veil obscured the face as the flowing robes trailed in the grey dust. The figure was clearly feminine. Behind it came ranks and ranks of small children, none more than five years old. All wore similar white robes and those I took to be girls all wore veils.

As they walked they sang in a high falsetto peculiar only to children. It was beautiful and naïve, both at the same time. It spoke of childhood innocence and innate goodness. In the devastated streets of the post-apocalyptic city it had an unearthly sound. It set me to tingling all down my spine as it cried out to the natural instinct to protect the young.

I dismounted from the running board and walked to meet them. I felt absolutely no fear, such was the disarming nature of the spectacle. The column of children had now come to a halt. I stood before the slender figure.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" my voice was thick with emotion.

The feminine voice was clear and firm. "We are the innocent damned. Unlike those forever damned to spend eternity in darkness, we are condemned to spend one hundred years here."

"But what have you done to deserve that?" I asked. "How can children have done anything that deserves damnation, however temporary?"

"We are all the victims of murder", came the reply. "You see, when you murder someone you don't only send them to the grave. You condemn them to spend one hundred years in darkness too, before they can ascend to the light."

Perhaps I was just in a highly sensitive state, but her answer had almost an accusatory tone. Could she possibly know that I too had committed murder? And there was something about the voice and the figure itself. A long-dead memory stirred as I frantically searched for recognition.

"Do I know you? Have we met before?" my tone was thin and faltering.

"You should do, Norman", responded the figure. "Surely you can't have murdered that many people."

Instantly I was stone cold. Even though I was suffering so many severe shocks to the system in this dimension, it never became any easier or less dramatic to deal with. As the memory climbed the ladder of consciousness towards full recall, my heart was beating so loudly it seemed to drown out all else.

"Susan?" the word was a breathy whisper. The figure threw back the veil and I looked again on the face of Susan, who I had shot to death more than fifty years previously. The visage was still that of the eighteen year old girl who had been my girlfriend. The ginger hair hanging below the headdress, the cluster of ginger freckles around her nose, all served to bring everything rushing back. And with it came the emotional turmoil of that time, closely followed by abject fear.

I had always feared this moment, this meeting beyond the grave when I would be confronted by the spirit of Susan. What would I say to this girl? What excuse could I give that would explain my selfish act that had denied her life? And above all else, how could I ask for her forgiveness?

Susan was smiling a gentle smile. She reached out and took both my hands in hers. Initially their coldness gave me pause, but this feeling was overwhelmed in the emotional rush that coursed through me. Tears ran freely down my cheeks.

“I too have waited a long time for this”, her tone was consoling and not the least condemnatory. “Now it is here though and we both must deal with it as best we can. I can’t forgive you, Norman. It is not in my power to do so. Only the Master of Light has that power. But on a personal level, I can say that I have come to understand. And for the present, that will have to suffice.”

Gently pulling me she led me off the highway and away from both of our ‘armies’. The children had now fallen silent and stared vacantly ahead. The scorpions stood unmoving in their ranks. It was as if someone had pressed the pause button in a video and all action was temporarily frozen. Except for the action involving Susan and I, that is. We were locked within our own particular movie as we walked hand in hand through the blasted streets of this blasted city.

She sat on the remains of a low wall and I sat beside her. It was a timeless moment that I wanted to last forever. All the love I had felt for her in the past totally gripped me. As I gazed into her eyes I was totally and utterly under her spell.

In retrospect, it was the word ‘spell’ which was the initial trigger. That coupled with the fact that I had noticed several of the children had left the highway and were making their way towards us, whilst the scorpions remained immobile.

I found that I was running over in my mind the last words that the Master had spoken to me. He had been cautioning me to be forever on my guard in the realm of darkness. He had advised me to use my new-found skill of looking beyond the external form and seeing the true nature of the entity. So I did this now. My vision retreated as I looked out of focus at Susan. Unaware of what I was doing she continued to smile at me.

Nothing was clear. Mist swirled about indistinct images. Occasionally there would be a gap and I stared closer. I was looking at a spider.

My reaction threw me backwards over the wall. As I scrambled to my feet Susan was already changing. Black, spiny legs, covered with hair forced their way through the thin material of the robe. Her head disappeared as her body expanded into that of the spider. The ‘children’ running towards me were similarly changing. Already some of them were fully formed spiders.

It was a godsend that I had taken to wearing the sonic weapon hanging from my belt. In one smooth movement it was in my hand. I aimed it at the spider that had been imitating Susan and pressed the button.

The spider recoiled, falling to the floor in spasm. I gave it a couple more shocks for good measure and then turned my attention to the other spiders. But the whole column of children had now transformed themselves into spiders and were attempting to come at me.

As if coming out of a dream, the scorpions suddenly became aware of the situation. With no hesitation whatsoever, they tore into the spiders. The sonic weapon felled all those who came too close to me; the scorpions dealt with the rest. Soon we were surrounded by spider corpses.

Suitably chastened, I set off again. Tripod had realised that something serious had happened and snuggled up close to try to reassure me. I could only reflect that she was the one and only true, constant entity that I knew and trusted. In all future confrontations with strange situations I would make sure that she was by my side.

I also reflected on the method the Dark Master has used. It was just as the Master of Light had warned me. My every weakness would be exploited against me. Over the years, especially the long prison years, I had made myself phenomenally strong. I was a man of very few weaknesses indeed. However, those I did have were fundamental to my being. Even after all this time the weight of the two souls I had taken still weighed heavily on me.

THE DARK MASTER

We proceeded several more miles and then the terrain suddenly changed. Whereas previously the landscape had been littered with all the debris of a ruined city, now everywhere was scoured clean. Not one small rock or piece of twisted metal remained. Even the highway in front of us was completely clear of blown sand or ash.

I got out of the cab to take closer stock of this new phenomenon. When even the seemingly most benign of occurrences could have dire consequences it was best to proceed with extreme caution. It was just as well that I did.

The further I advanced along the highway the stronger I felt some kind of pull on me. I looked down to see the sonic weapon and the chain that held it to my belt, extended out parallel to the ground. With a shriek, one of the smallest of the young scorpions passed me by, its legs frantically trying to make purchase with the ground. Then, with one final scream, it tumbled end over end and disappeared at speed along the highway. I retreated rapidly.

Clearly we were approaching some kind of vortex. Equally clearly, the closer we got to the centre of the city and the 'Cave of Darkness' the stronger the pull on us would be. It was in the nature of a vortex that the pull would be exerted over three hundred and sixty degrees. Thus there would be no way around this thing. I climbed back into the cab to ponder the problem.

As I got back in the pull on me immediately ceased. The chain of the sonic weapon, previously extended, now hung limp by my side. So whatever the other effects of the phenomenon, it seemed to have no influence upon things inside the lorry. I decided to stage various experiments to determine the extent of the vortex's power.

All objects, large or small, dropped out of the open cab window were immediately sucked towards the vortex. Running out of things to experiment with, I decided to fetch more stuff from the refrigerated food compartment immediately behind the cab. I had difficulty opening the door. After several hefty shoves I managed to force it open. Piled up behind it were most of the packets of food from the shelves. That put paid to my theory that everything inside the lorry was immune from the pull of the vortex. I returned to the cab.

There was many small items littered about. Yet all had remained firmly in position. I dismissed the possibility that this was a function of the cab of the lorry only. Therefore it had to be a function of something **in** the cab.

My gaze settled on the lead box containing the Seed. It certainly made a kind of sense. No doubt the element of the material of the Seed had an enormous atomic weight. Perhaps this fixed the Seed and everything in its immediate vicinity to the ground. Maybe it just exerted a very strong gravitational pull that negated the pull of the vortex. It was very easy to test this theory out.

I climbed out of the cab with the lead box and its contents in my hand. I advanced along the highway. Sure enough, I felt no pull from the vortex and the sonic weapon hung downwards from my belt. It was an eureka moment. As long as I was close to the Seed I was safe from the effects of the vortex.

I returned to the cab. If I had needed any more proof I would have found it in the fact that all of the small, light objects were now piled up against the wind-screen. I backed the lorry up rapidly, then powered it down. The rest of the journey would have to be made on foot.

I decided that I should try to communicate the change in tactics to the mother scorpion. Having no idea of what to say or how to say it, I approached the great beast. I was wasting my time, for it seemed that she already knew. She had settled down in the shell

of a building with her young gathered around her. No doubt they would amuse themselves hunting spiders until I returned.

The next task was to communicate to Tripod that she should always stay close to me and the Seed. As with the scorpion, she already knew too. Step for step, she followed me around the lorry.

It was in deciding what to take with us for the journey that I made another discovery about the vortex. It seemed that all things metal attracted a phenomenal pull from the vortex out of all proportion to their size or weight. This ruled out taking all the weaponry, except for the all-wooden cross-bow. I never did understand why I had included it in the first place. Now I reasoned that it must all have been part of the Master's training beam process. The fact that the sonic weapon had been made out of a special, hardened plastic also made a lot of sense now.

Food and water were obviously an absolute necessity. However, we were now no further than half a dozen miles from the city centre, so we would only need enough for that comparatively short journey. Nevertheless I loaded up a rucksack with as much as I could comfortably carry and, with Tripod close by my side, I headed off along the highway.

Progress was both easy and quick, the vortex having scoured all obstacles from our path. The highway grew increasingly charred as we went, along with everything else on the way. The vortex itself was something of an anti-climax, no more than a hole in the ground perhaps forty feet in diameter. Around the edges of the hole ran a downward path a few feet wide, like a screw thread around a screw-hole. The centre though seemed bottomless. Every so often a piece of loose debris would fly past and disappear down the hole, reminding us, should we have needed it, of just how dangerous our situation was.

The pathway was quite steep and the footing precarious. I decided that the rucksack of food was a luxury we could no longer afford. One way or another our work would be over very quickly and the journey back to the lorry was only a short one. Securing the Seed in a small pouch I carried around my neck, I threw the rucksack to the floor and watched as it was immediately sucked into the vortex.

Being so close now to the cave of the Dark Master, I guessed that someone or something would confront me before too long. The narrow, descending path was an ideal location for such a confrontation. I sprung the cross-bow, placed a quarrel firmly in place and, holding it in both hands, began the descent.

All the time I looked about warily, but once out of the surface sunlight it was difficult to see by just the luminous green light. Innocent shadows, fleetingly observed, seemed to have substance, as I stepped around fallen rocks whilst encouraging Tripod to keep close. One slip would propel me into the void, together with the Seed, and seal the fate of Tripod as well. As I focused all my attention on the job in hand, the mental pressure became intolerable.

The deeper we went the hotter it got. Much of this was to do with a natural rise in temperature, but a lot of it was due to the tension as well. It began to dawn on me that I couldn't keep this up indefinitely. We were now several hundred feet down, another several hundred would take me to the limit of my endurance.

Just as I was becoming seriously concerned, the pathway leveled off and came to an abrupt end. On the right a suspended rope bridge crossed the chasm. With rope hand-holds and narrow wooden slats for foot-holds, it looked as fragile as it was precarious. Even without the vortex it would be very dangerous to cross; with the vortex it smacked of suicide.

The downward pull caused it to swing wildly, as if it was being buffeted by strong winds. It was also an ideal place for an enemy to stage an attack. With the cross-bow at the ready, I would have to make my way across, single file, whilst keeping Tripod up close all the time too. I sat down to ponder the problem, searching for a better plan.

The voice interrupted my deliberations. As I looked up quickly I saw a burly figure at the other end of the rope bridge. Jack looked no different from the day I had killed him forty years ago now. I can't say that I was surprised to see him. After Susan's rhetorical question concerning how many people I had murdered I had been thinking a lot about Jack of late. I had guessed that the Dark Master would use him somehow to block my path.

"To echo Susan, I have been waiting a long time for this, my friend", Jack's voice was both sarcastic and gloating. "My Master thinks that you are a worthy champion to fight me. He thinks the mixture of good and evil in your soul makes you stronger. On the contrary, I unreservedly embrace the darkness. The light dilutes one's strength. What do you think?" He raised both arms as if in appeal.

"I think you talk too much, Jack. Always did." As I spoke I swung up the cross-bow and fired a bolt. I had never fired a cross-bow before in my life, but, courtesy of the Master's training beam, I was now a skilled archer. The bolt took Jack in the armpit, where the plates of his leather armour met.

Jack's scream was as much of rage as it was of pain. "The ritual, the ritual, you coward. What about the ritual? Fight me like a man. You are in breach of the 'Old Laws'."

"We'll save the ritual for your funeral Jack", I replied while loading another bolt into the cross-bow. "You see, there is far too much at stake for ritual. You think you have taken just a wounding shot. The cross-bow was designed by my Master. The refinement of the potent nerve poison on the bolt's tip was purely my contribution. Already you are growing numb."

Whether he was or not I never determined. Aiming more carefully now I fired. The bolt took him clean through the eye. With another scream he stumbled backwards and fell into the abyss.

I fought against a rising sense of triumph. For someone who had sworn never to kill a living soul again, I had now killed Jack, and for the second time. To debate whether he was a soul or an evil spirit was merely to play at semantics. Once again I had extinguished a life. Once more I had released 'The Beast'. And in the releasing I had empowered it mightily. I felt the old familiar feeling of unbridled power. Rage copulated with hate and gave birth to absolute arrogance. I was filled with the blood lust and cast about for something else to kill.

Tripod's barking brought me out of it. As homicidal eyes fixed upon the golden creature I realised that I could never do it harm. It was enough to give me pause. I focused totally and managed to regain control.

With Jack out of the way, I had an intuitive feeling that we were very close to the Cave of Darkness. I further reasoned that any other combat would be mental rather than physical. In truth, I didn't fancy negotiating the rope bridge, holding the cross-bow whilst keeping Tripod close. I would need both hands free as I inched across. I threw the cross-bow into the void and gingerly started across the bridge with Tripod.

Once again the dog was a tower of strength in a dangerous situation. Needing no encouragement whatsoever, she followed me closely. When I stopped she stopped too. Like some circus double act, we crossed the bridge in unison.

Just as I had thought, on the other side was the entrance to a large cave. Without hesitation I walked right in, with Tripod by my side. After several steps I stopped and waited in the pitch blackness. I could feel the pressure of Tripod against my leg.

It seemed that I waited for a long time. I could see nothing anyway so I closed my eyes. Mentally I tried to feel out the space, but an overpowering blast of negative etheric energy seemed to suppress even thought. Heaven knows why, but I started to whistle a breathy, tuneless whistle.

Almost immediately an octagonal screen came alive high in the ceiling of the cave. Thus far it was an identical experience to that in the Cave of Light. Only this time the likeness on the screen was that of myself.

“Welcome Norman”, came the deep voice that reverberated around the cave.

“I’ve already experienced your welcomes at the hands of Susan, Jack and the spiders”, I retorted.

“Out in the realm of darkness it is every man for himself”, came the reply. “I didn’t know you or your intent. I would have treated any intruder the same.”

“That would be small consolation to me if you had succeeded”, I continued.

“Let us forget what might have been and concentrate on what is”, said the Dark Master in his most reasonable tone. “We are much alike, you and I. Even now ‘The Beast’ strains to be free in you. Why deny your true self? You have so much potential for greatness. Embrace the darkness and find your true destiny.”

“Yet every time I embraced darkness in the past, it only brought me misery and pain”, I countered.

“That’s because you resist it, agonise over it and allow conscience to torment you”, he replied. “Look at these people. Do you think they are troubled by conscience?” So saying he lit up all the screens. I saw hundreds of people in society settings. I recognised members of royal families, powerful politicians, captains of industry, film stars and other household names. They were at weddings, state occasions, international conferences and parties.

“Now look carefully again”, continued the Dark Master. The screens changed and there were the same people, the same faces, but this time they were in the process of celebrating the Black Mass. Naked bodies writhed in orgies of drunken debauchery while human sacrifices were taking place, all against a backdrop of Satanic imagery. “They all serve me. They all worship me”, he shouted.

The screens changed yet again. This time there were fabulous palaces surrounded by carefully manicured gardens. Wonderful paintings and other works of art filled the rooms. Tables were spread with lavish feasts. Fabulous diamonds glittered on the necks and hands of beautiful courtesans. High above it all, at the top of an impossibly long flight of marble stairs, I sat on a golden throne. Either side of me stood Janice and Susan, resplendent in long, flame-red dresses. Past the base of the marble staircase marched thousands of people, saluting me as they went.

“Norman, all this can be yours. All you have to do is to fulfill your destiny. Serve me and great wealth will naturally follow”, entreated the Dark Master.

Such was the power of the imagery that I was sorely tempted. I imagined myself in those settings, ruling with both Janice and Susan as my queens. My life until now had been one of unrelieved pain and unhappiness. Wasn’t I too entitled to some pleasure?

Once more, Tripod’s barking brought me round and ushered in the voice of reason. The beautiful and mystical girl that was Janice would never associate herself with darkness. The wealth and status would mean nothing to her too.

“What does it benefit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul?” The words just seemed to jump into my mouth and I spoke them without thinking.

“Pah!”, exploded the Dark Master. “Don’t quote the words of that weakling, Christ, to me. The Prince of Peace ,eh? Show me where he has established peace? From Somalia, to Iraq, to Pakistan to Afghanistan there are endless wars. Genocides rage from the Balkans, to Darfur to Rwanda to Sri Lanka. Innocents die by the thousand and everywhere man is in chains. Christianity is a redundant doctrine. Everywhere I rule!” He ended with a shout.

He continued immediately in a more subdued tone, as if he were sharing a secret with me. “And my time is coming very soon. Never before have I been so strong. In the world’s only super-power, all the top people serve me. We are on the verge of a great triumph. Mankind will soon be humbled, then decimated. The remnants will be ruled by the Satanic elite. Join me, Norman. You can play an important part in the greatest event in human history. Seize the time. Fulfill your destiny.”

There was a strong and seductive appeal to his words. Again my mind was off on flights of fancy. Wasn’t it a fact that many great and famous leaders had used methods that, at the time, seemed cruel and heartless. Ghenghis Khan, Stalin, Mao and even Churchill had all been judged harshly by history at times, but on closer examination couldn’t it be argued that their actions had greatly benefited their peoples?

I stood for long minutes considering the argument. The screens were still showing the rewards that the Dark Master was offering me. However darkness lurked at the margins of the cave. It served to remind me that, if I accepted the offer, I would constantly live in a world of darkness. Even in this shadowy grotto I began to yearn for the light. Darkness was an unnatural state and was synonymous with the grave. Mentally I shook the darkness from my mind and in so doing the reality became blindingly obvious. I had taken a vow to serve the light and only since then had I found some peace of mind. There was only one course of action that I could take.

My fingers fumbled with the cord that secured the pouch around my neck. “Noooo” the word was long and drawn out like a cry of pain. “Don’t be a fool” entreated the Dark Master. As I opened the lead box and spilled the Seed onto the floor it instantly cut off his voice while simultaneously shattering all the screens. Once again I stood in complete darkness.

Shards of glass began to fall from above. Calling Tripod to follow me I raced back to the entrance of the cave. I checked momentarily as I considered the dangers of facing the vortex without the protection of the Seed, but if we stayed we were doomed anyway. It seemed like the whole place was collapsing around us.

Carefully, I approached the rope bridge. It wasn’t swinging nearly so wildly now. Further, I could feel no pull whatsoever from the vortex. I guessed that somehow the Seed had cancelled out that effect. There were still considerable dangers though. As we crossed the bridge we had to dodge debris falling from above.

At a run we started up the cork-screw path. Thankfully, ascending was considerably easier than descending had been. There was little danger of over-balancing, no pull from the vortex and we knew exactly where we were going. Very soon the luminous green glow was replaced by light from above. Right on cue, as we reached the surface the hole began to collapse in on itself.

Despite the undeniable cataclysm behind us, out in the daylight there were no signs of change. As we hurried back along the blasted highway, the realm of darkness was still unrelievedly grim. I reasoned that perhaps the Seed would take some time to transform it into another realm of light. However, my mission was now over and I could do no more here. My duty was to report back to the Master as soon as I could.

The scorpion was exactly where we had left it, but surrounded by the remains of both spiders and young scorpions. I guessed that she had been cannibalizing the scorpions

when she couldn't be bothered to chase spiders. It certainly explained the distinct lack of scorpions in the vicinity.

It got to its feet and, without my having to say a word, headed off, back up the highway. I climbed into the lorry, programmed it to follow the scorpion, then prepared food for Tripod and myself. I found that I was mentally and physically exhausted. With the lorry trundling along on automatic, I fell into a deep sleep.

I must have slept for several hours. Yet when I woke I still felt very tired. And it was a physical kind of tiredness rather than just a sleepy kind. I had the feeling that no matter how long I slept I would still wake up feeling tired. I guessed it to be part of the effects of the radiation. I continued to take the radiation tablets, but the tiredness still persisted.

RETURN TO EARTH-REALM

It was hardly a triumphal return to Eden. There were no flags and bunting laid on by the Master and no words of welcome as I stood before him in the Cave of Light. Quite matter-of-factly he pressed me for the tiniest details of the encounter with the Dark Master, right down to the exact terminology used and any inflection in his voice.

I was completely open and honest with him, holding nothing back. I had some reservations when I told him of my feelings immediately after killing Jack, even pausing to give him time to consider what was really a confession. But he never commented on it, instead pressing me to continue to my encounter with the Dark Master.

I went over the exchange several times. In places the Master asked me what I thought the Dark Master had meant when he said certain things, as if my interpretation would differ from his own. When I came to the part where the Dark Master had boasted that his time was soon coming, we went over it time and time again, especially the bit about mankind being first humbled, then decimated, to be ruled over by the Satanic elite.

“It is just as I had feared.” I had never heard the Master’s voice so serious. “I sent you on this mission unprepared. In so many ways you weren’t ready. But I had no choice because the situation demanded it. Back in the dimension of corporeal Earth, the forces of darkness are preparing for a great strike, a great evil against mankind. If they succeed, darkness will rule for a millennium. The Satanic elite will indeed be in the ascendant. I now know part of their plan, but I do not know it all. I will send you and your companion back to the Earth dimension to try to thwart it. As before, you are unready and unworthy, but you are all that I have got.”

As compliments go, I’d certainly had better ones. However, perhaps the situation was so grave that there was no place for praise or pleasantries. “You know I will do everything I can to succeed”, I said in my most self-assured manner.

“Yes, I know you will”, responded the Master. “We will just have to hope that it will be enough. Go and rest for a few hours and prepare yourself mentally. When you return there is a lot of detail that you must commit to memory.”

In truth, my mind was racing at such a pace that sleep or rest was impossible. Right on the two hour mark I was back in the Cave, impatiently waiting for the Master’s briefing.

There was a chair placed by one of the octagonal screens. I was invited to sit and told to pay close attention. Even though I would be given a print-out of the information afterwards, I should try to memorise the most important facts. The Master explained that when I travelled between dimensions I would not be able to take anything with me.

The first thing I committed to memory was the web address of the article, www.globalresearch.ca. Any internet-linked computer in the Earth dimension would bring up the identical details. The article was entitled ‘Missing Nukes: Treason of the Highest Order’ and was written by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya. It read:-

Missing Nukes on August 29/30 2007

According to a wide range of reports, several nuclear bombs were ‘lost’ for 36 hours after taking off August 29/30 on a ‘cross-country journey’ across the U.S., from U.S.A.F. Base Minot in North Dakota to U.S.A.F. Base Barksdale in Louisiana. Reportedly, in total there were six W80-1 nuclear weapons armed on AGM-129 Advanced Cruise Missiles (ACMs) that were ‘lost’. The story was first reported by the Military Times, after military servicemen leaked the story.

According to official reports, the U.S. Air Force pilots did not know that they were carrying weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Once in Louisiana, they also left the nuclear weapons unsecured on the runway for several hours.

U.S. Air Force deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Plans and Requirements, Major-General Richard Y. Newton III commented on the incident, saying there was an ‘unprecedented’ series of procedural errors, which revealed “an erosion of adherence to weapons-handling standards”.

These statements are misleading. The lax security was not the result of procedural negligence within the U.S. Air Force, but rather the consequence of a deliberate tampering with these procedures.

If a soldier, marine, airman or sailor were even to be issued a rifle and rifle magazine – weaponry of a far lesser significance, danger and cost – there is a strict signing and accountability process that involves a chain of command and paperwork. This is part of the military checks and balances used by all the services within the U.S. Armed Forces.

Military servicemen qualified to speak on the subject will confirm that there is a stringent nuclear weapons handling procedure. There is a rigorous, almost inflexible, chain of command in regards to the handling of nuclear weapons and not just any soldier, sailor, airman or marine is allowed to handle nuclear weapons. Only servicemen specialized in specific handling and loading procedures, are perm certified to handle, access and load nuclear warheads.

Every service personnel that moves or even touches these weapons must sign a tracking paper and has total accountability for their movement. There is good reason for the paperwork behind moving these weapons. The military officers that order the movement of nuclear weapons, including base commanders, must also fill out paper forms.

In other words, **unauthorised removal of nuclear weapons would be virtually impossible to accomplish unless the chain of command were bypassed**, involving, in this case, the deliberate tampering with the paperwork and tracking procedures.

The strategic bombers that carried the nuclear weapons also could not fly with their loaded weaponry without the authorization of senior military officials and the base commander. The go-ahead authorization of senior military officials must be transmitted to the servicemen that upload the nuclear weapons. Without this authorization no flights can take place.

In the case of the missing nukes, orders were given and flight permission was granted. Once again, any competent and eligible U.S. Air Force member can certify that this is the standard procedure.

There are two important questions to be answered in relation to the ‘lost’ nukes incident:

- 1) Who gave the order to arm the W80-1 thermonuclear warheads on the AGM-129 Advanced Cruise Missiles (ACMs)? At what level in the military hierarchy did this order originate? How was the order transmitted down the chain of command?
- 2) If this was not a procedural error, what was the under-lying military-political objective sought by those who gave the orders?

The Impossibility of ‘Losing’ Nuclear Weapons

As Robert Stormer, a former U.S. lieutenant-commander in the U.S. Navy has commented: “Press reports initially cited the Air Force mistake of flying nuclear weapons over the United States in violation of Air Force standing orders and

international treaties, while completely missing the more important major issues, such as how six nuclear cruise missiles got loose to begin with.”

Stormer also makes a key point, which is not exactly a secret: “There is a strict chain of custody for all such weapons. Nuclear weapons handling is spelled out in great detail in Air Force regulations, to the credit of that service. Every person who orders the movement of these weapons, handles them, breaks seals or moves any nuclear weapon must sign off for tracking purposes.”

Stormer continues:- “Two armed munitions specialists are required to work as a team with all nuclear weapons. All individuals working with nuclear weapons must meet very strict security standards and be tested for loyalty – this is known as a ‘(Nuclear Weapons) Personnel Reliability Program.’ They work in restricted areas within eyeshot of one another and are reviewed constantly.”

Stormer unwraps the whole Pentagon cover-up by pointing out some logical facts and military procedures. First he reveals that “All security forces assigned (to handle and protect nuclear weapons) are authorized to use deadly force to protect the weapons from any threat (including would-be thieves).”

He then points out a physical reality that cannot be shrugged aside; “Nor does anyone quickly move a one-ton cruise missile - or forget about six of them, as reported by some news outlets, especially cruise missiles loaded with high explosives.”

He further explains another physical and procedural reality about nuclear weapons assembly: “The United States does not transport nuclear weapons meant for elimination attached to their launch vehicles under the wings of a combat aircraft. The procedure is to separate the warhead from the missile, encase the warhead and transport it by military cargo aircraft to a repository – not an operational bomber base that just happens to be the staging area for Middle East operations.”

For those who have been observing these series of events it is becoming clear that a criminal government is at the helm of the United States. There was no way that the six nuclear missiles could have been ‘mistakenly’ loaded, especially when their separate warheads had to be affixed to the missiles by individuals specialized in such a task.

It is also being claimed that military teams in U.S.A.F. Base Minot and U.S.A.F. Base Barksdale made major “procedural errors”. What are the probabilities of this occurring simultaneously in two locations?

It is also worth noting that original reports from military sources talked about only five of the six nuclear warheads from Minot being accounted for in Barksdale!

Bush Threatens Iran with Nuclear Weapons

What adds intrigue to an understanding of the missing nukes, are the international events and war games taking place just after the ‘lost’ nuclear weapons incident, not to mention the President’s ongoing threats to attack Iran with nuclear weapons and Vice President Cheney’s repeated warnings that a second large scale terrorist attack on America is under preparation, with the support of Iran.

In the U.S. under the Vigilant Shield 2008 war games (initiated in September 2007) and the TOPOFF anti-terrorism exercises, some form of nuclear terrorist attack on American soil had been envisaged. The roles of Russia and China had also been contemplated. The latter would be ‘a likely scenario’ had the U.S. attacked Iran and as a result Russia and China had decided to intervene. Under Vigilant Shield 2007, held in 2006, the possibility of nuclear war with Iran’s allies, Russia and China, had been

contemplated in the war game scenario. The Kremlin has responded by holding its own war games.

The six warheads were not meant for use in theatre operations against Iran. This is obvious because if they were then they would have been deployed via the proper procedural routes without the need to hide anything. Besides, there are already theatre level nuclear weapons ready and armed in Europe and the Middle East for any possible Middle Eastern mission. There was something more to the incident.

As I finished reading the article I immediately looked up. There was a lot of detail to commit to memory but I could work on that once I got the print-out. For the moment I would be interested to hear the Master's summary of the data. He began straight away.

"It is quite clear from my own inquiries that the Satanic elite in America are now in possession of a nuclear weapon. As described in the article, and many other reports for that matter, six nuclear weapons left Base Minot for Base Barksdale and only five were returned. One would have thought that there would have been a hue and cry in the American media over this, but such is the control that the Satanic elite have over all forms of mass media, both in the U.S. and worldwide, that it has all been hushed up. Articles have been removed from websites and many military personnel involved in the moving of the warheads have died in mysterious circumstances."

He paused, no doubt to let the full implications of what he had just said sink in, before continuing. "The question is, 'what do the Satanic elite intend to do with the nuke?' I believe they intend to stage a so-called 'false flag' incident, by exploding it somewhere in the U.S. Then they will blame it on Iran and use it as a pretext for a nuclear attack. Further, as they know of the close relationship of both Russia and China with Iran, the first strike will be aimed at those countries too. Thus we will have World War III."

"This explains what the Dark Master was referring to when he said that mankind would be humbled then decimated", I chipped in. "The Satanic elite, safe in their nuclear bunkers, would be left to rule over the remnants."

"Exactly, and darkness will rule for a millennium", added the Master. "Unless we can stop them."

"But how can we influence events in the Earth dimension from here?" I queried.

"I can send you and your companion back quite easily", responded the Master. "You don't have much life left in this dimension anyway as the radiation has severely damaged you both. I will create younger, cloned versions. You will start a new life cycle in the Earth dimension."

"But will we be spirits or will we be corporeal beings?" I asked, quite puzzled.

"You will be both", came the reply. "You will have a choice. Initially you will be sent as spirits. Changes can only be made according to the lunar cycle. You can change from one to the other at the full moon. However, you won't be able to change back until the next full moon. Whilst you are spirit you will remain unseen by ordinary mortals, but beware that adepts high in the Satanic hierarchy will be aware of your presence. You will also be able to fly, travel great distances, go back in time and pass through solid objects. But in your corporeal form you will be subject to all the laws of nature that ordinary mortals are subject to, while having none of the abilities you had in spirit form."

"So why should we ever take the chance of being in corporeal form?" I asked.

"You will see. A situation might arise where you have to have substance, but that will be up to you to judge", said the Master with finality, indicating that the discussion was over.

TASK FORCE 121

As he cruised up to the gate-lodge of U.S. Air Base Minot, Colonel Casey North mentally steeled himself for the ordeal that he knew must inevitably come. Not that he was uncertain of his position. He was unreservedly backed by some of the most powerful people in the country. In fact, he was merely doing their bidding. He knew he would prevail, but he was also aware of the military mind-set. It was all about chain of command and established procedures. He was just about to tip all of that on its ear.

He had made the appointment for this meeting over a week ago. Even at that early stage they wanted to know who he was and what group he represented. They had balked at his explanation that he worked for Task Force 121 and he had been forced to concede that he worked under the general auspices of the Joint Special Operations Command. Further than that he would not go though. When pressed he said that the rest was classified and he would explain in detail when he arrived for the meeting.

He passed his ID through the window of the car to the officer manning the gate-lodge. He watched as the details were punched into a computer. When the officer asked him to look closely into the camera he stuck his head part-way out of the window and stared at the mobile camera that would scan his retina. Then he patiently waited some more. He knew the check would be thorough. They didn't let in just anybody to see the Base Commander.

As the check was completed, the attitude of the officer changed noticeably. He handed the ID back, flashed a friendly smile that acknowledged he was one of their own, gave detailed directions to the building he should head for and then let him through.

As he pulled up at the Base Command building an officer was waiting for him. He was waved into a parking space right outside the building, then the officer escorted him inside. With a curt, "Colonel Emig will see you right away", he was shown into a large office and the door was shut after him.

Sitting behind a large table were three senior officers. He recognized all of them from their photos that he had so recently studied in the folder he carried. He also knew everything about them. Colonel Bruce Emig was commander of the 5th Bomb Wing and therefore the Base Commander. Colonel Robert Critchlow was commanding officer of the 91st Operations Group, a missile unit and the operational backbone of the 91st Space Wing. Colonel Myron Freeman was commander of 91st Security Forces Group, responsible for securing Minot's nuclear arsenal. All had pronounced scowls on their faces.

Colonel Emig waved him to sit in a chair in front of them. With an ironic, "And what can we do for you on this fine August morning, Colonel North?" Emig declared the meeting open in a manner distinctly lacking in warmth.

North understood implicitly. He had specifically asked to meet with the three of them, an unusual request from an outsider. He could imagine their frustration when they tried to check into his background. Whole areas were marked classified and it was only his extremely high security classification that had got him the meeting in the first place.

Mentally taking a deep breath, he began. "Gentlemen, thank you for seeing me. I do realize that you are all busy men. However, what I am about to request from you has the highest priority as well the highest security classification."

"Yes, Colonel North", butted in Colonel Freeman. "We noticed that you have an extremely high security classification too. Can we ask you what you do at Task Force 121?"

North prepared himself for the inevitable storm. "I'm sorry Colonel Freeman, but I am not presently disposed to comment on the work of Task Force 121."

“So whose authority do you work under? Are you C.I.A., N.S.A., who do you work for?” pressed Freeman.

“We work under the auspices of the Joint Special Operations Command”, responded North.

“And who the hell might they be?” came back Freeman. “We’ve looked ‘em up, asked everyone we know and nobody knows a damn thing about them.”

North paused for a moment, then continued. “Gentlemen, what I am about to tell you is highly classified information and must not go beyond this room. We report directly to Vice-President Cheney and work out of his office.”

Just as North had expected, there was a stunned and hostile silence. Emig recovered first. “And where in the Lord’s grand scheme of things does that fit into the military chain of command?”

North was enjoying himself now, although you wouldn’t have known it from his demeanour. “It’s doesn’t, Sir. It’s above the military chain of command.”

Colonel Critchlow had been sitting, quietly simmering, but now he exploded. “Pah. I’ve never heard such nonsense in my life. I’ve spent the whole of my adult life in the military, North, and to my very good knowledge nothing, absolutely nothing, is above the military chain of command.”

For North it was time to play hardball. “Gentlemen, gentlemen, before we start to lose our tempers perhaps I had better share some home truths with you. You are all new to Minot Base. Each of you were posted here in June, barely more than two months ago. You will recall that shortly after you all arrived, a visit was paid to the Base by Air Force Chief of Staff, General Moseley. He spoke to each of you individually. If you recall he warned you that a very important mission would be coming up in August. General Emig, if you would be so good as to call General Moseley right now, you will find that he is expecting your call.”

There was a secure phone on the table in front of him, but clearly Emig wanted a degree of privacy when he made this call. He got up and hurried across to a phone on a smaller table in the corner of the room. North heard him say “Get me General Moseley, Chief of Staff, immediately.

North saw the look of surprise on Emig’s face when General Moseley answered right away. As North had said, he was indeed waiting for the call, for they all had envisaged this exact scenario. Emig clearly didn’t like what he was being told either as North heard him interrupt with a succession of “But General”s. Finally, General Moseley must have lost his temper. Emig suddenly stood to attention and said briskly, “Yes Sir. Yes Sir. I understand entirely Sir. Thank you for your time, Sir.” Then he put down the phone.

It was an ashen Colonel Emig who returned to the table where the others sat. Quickly regaining his composure he announced, “Well it seems that he has the full backing of the Chief of Staff, so we had better hear him out. Please continue Colonel North.”

North continued seamlessly, as if the interruption hadn’t occurred. Now was the time to take the bull by the horns, he decided. He cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, my orders are to instruct you to mount six armed W80-1 nuclear warheads onto six AGM-129 Advanced Cruise Missiles, load them under the wings of an appropriate aircraft and fly them to Air Base Barksdale in Louisiana.”

The three Colonels stared at him in utter disbelief, although there was no hostility now.

“Would you mind repeating that again, slowly”, interjected Emig. North did as requested.

There was a long silence. “Colonel North”, said Emig coolly, “You are no doubt aware that to do as you request would place us in breach of not only Air Force standing orders but also of international nuclear treaties.”

“Thank you Colonel” responded North immediately, “but both I and my superiors are well aware of those restrictions. However, as the Vice-President said, sometimes the requirements of national security come before both standing orders and international treaties.” North had just played his ace and he knew it. He carried on before he could be further interrupted. “I will leave the operational details to your selves. The flight will take place on the 30th of this month, that is, in three days time. I will be waiting at Air Base Barksdale to receive the weapons.”

North stood and saluted the three officers. “Gentlemen I won’t take up any more of your time. I will remind you though that this mission has the highest possible security classification and details must not be divulged to anyone outside the chain of command involved in moving the weapons. I hope this is clear.” With that he turned and left the room leaving three very unhappy Colonels behind him.

Three days later, Casey North stood in the early morning Louisiana cool on a perimeter runway at Air Base Barksdale. Close by was parked a closed truck, armoured like a security van. Six heavily armed members of Task Force 121 stood in a semi-circle, making desultory small talk. A short distance away five more members of the team huddled around a hydraulic lift truck.

As he waited, North reflected on his mission. He had worked on undercover operations in the past, but never one with such a high security classification. As the team leader of Task Force 121 he knew more than anyone else, but he only knew that he was to take possession of a nuclear warhead. He had no idea what it was going to be used for. This did, in fact, bother him, but there was nothing he could do about it. The rest of the team knew even less than he did, yet they were content to operate on this need-to-know basis.

The six strong weapons team were all vastly experienced Special Forces personnel. Many times in the past they had worked in the same way and took it to be just part of the job. They all knew that a man who asked awkward questions wouldn’t get an answer anyway and would be passed over for future missions. In their line of work, inquisitiveness was career suicide.

The five over by the hydraulic truck were all recent additions to the team. North had never worked with any of them before. However, in view of their particular specialties, that wasn’t surprising. Each were highly trained munitions specialists, certified under the Nuclear Weapons Personnel Reliability Program of the Department of Defence. It would be their job to handle the nuclear warhead.

A movement off in the distance caught North’s attention. He whistled a short, two-toned signal and his men all came fully alert. The ex-Special Forces personnel cocked their weapons and took up defensive positions around the armoured truck. The five specialists huddled even closer to their hydraulic truck.

North watched as a Barksdale security patrol car came along the perimeter runway, then turned off at a right angle fully six hundred yards from his group. North waved for his men to stand down. There would be no security patrols in their section of the base. North had made that very clear to the Base Commander at their first meeting.

Things had gone very well, all things considered. However, General Moseley had already phoned the Commander and told him that his full cooperation was necessary. There had been none of the histrionics that had so characterized the Minot meeting. But then the Barksdale Base Commander wasn’t being asked to actually do anything. On the contrary, he was being asked not to do anything.

North had told him that a Stratofortress from Minot would be landing in the early hours of the 30th August. It would taxi to a perimeter runway, where the crew would park it. Then they would leave it unattended. North and his team would take over from there.

Suddenly North heard a low, booming sound far off in the distance. It was a sound he knew well. It heralded the approach of the workhorse of the United States strategic nuclear bomber fleet, the B52H Stratofortress. It would be with them in a matter of minutes now.

Another whistle brought the team fully alert again. One of the specialists started the hydraulic truck and the rest climbed inside. North went to stand with the armed group next to the armoured truck. Knowing what to expect, all put their fingers in their ears.

The distant rumble grew into a roaring thunder as the great bulk of the Stratofortress swooped on the main runway of the airfield. The very ground seemed to shake and a veritable hurricane of tormented air blasted everything as it landed. Massive engines screamed as they fought to arrest the plane's headlong rush.

In the air, the plane had grace. On the ground though it was an ungainly beast, as it trundled towards the perimeter runway and North's group. The latter were still bent over against the blast of air, fingers still firmly plugging ears. Any kind of communication was impossible while the engines were still running.

As the plane finally fell silent, it served to remind North that the landing had probably aroused the surrounding countryside. Not that anyone would disturb them, but it was best to get the work done before prying eyes came on the scene. Air bases were surrounded by camera buffs who delighted in snapping anything that flew. North didn't want to take the chance that some high powered photo lens might pick his men up through the wire of the perimeter fence.

Even as the crew were leaving the plane, the hydraulic truck was beneath one of the great wings. North watched as the hydraulic arm was raised to gently nestle under one of the Cruise Missiles. Extending ladders appeared and two specialists with tool-boxes climbed up to one of the missiles. The whirring of power tools could be heard, then they climbed down again. The hydraulic arm retracted as the one-ton missile was brought to ground level.

First checking that the armed group had taken up defensive positions, North moved closer. Even with all his experience, he had never seen a nuclear warhead up close before. He watched as the five specialists unbolted sections of the missile. He held his breath as they separated the warhead from the whole. He was surprised how small it was, even though he had been fully briefed on its exact dimensions. Cylindrical in shape, it was 11.8 inches in diameter and 31.4 inches in length. Yet it weighed all of 290 pounds. North stood back as the five specialists lifted it clear of the missile and, oh so gently, placed it on the concrete of the runway.

A small panel was unscrewed in the warhead. From his briefing North recognized the computerized tracking system that the United States had in every one of its nuclear warheads. At any given time Central Command knew exactly where every warhead was. Very shortly, this one would be the exception to that rule. North watched as one of the specialists first punched in a code to a miniature keyboard, then, using small wire cutters, snipped two cables and lifted the whole tracking mechanism out.

North walked over to the armoured truck and unlocked the back doors. On the floor of the truck were six identical black cylinders, all slightly bigger than the warhead.

"Take the closest one", called out North to the specialists as they gathered round. He watched as they lifted one clear of the truck.

It was the work of seconds to place the warhead in the cylinder and replace it in the back of the truck. Although it now contained the warhead, the cylinder was indistinguishable from the rest. This, thought North, was the whole idea. It was a hedge against the possibility that one of the team might be disloyal. Back at Task Force 121 Base the six cylindrical containers would all go in different directions, to different locations. Inquisitive eyes would never know where the actual one containing the warhead was.

As the specialists lifted the now warhead-less Cruise Missile back up to the plane and affixed it to the wing, North and the Special Forces group climbed into the front compartment of the armoured truck. The specialists got into their hydraulic truck and pulled in behind them. Then, in convoy, they headed to the gate of Air Base Barksdale and off into the Louisiana countryside.

Silently, North heaved a sigh of relief. It was still a 30-minute drive to Task Force 121 Base, deep in the Louisiana swamps, but the hard work was now over. Save for some natural catastrophe, he could safely assume that his mission was completed. He took considerable satisfaction from the knowledge that he was the first person in history to steal a nuclear bomb.

It had all been remarkably straight-forward really. We had taken to spirit form like the proverbial ducks to water. The hardest part to get used to was that neither of us had a clearly defined form. We both resembled shadowy silhouettes, although Tripod's was barely half the size of mine.

The revelation was communication. It was telepathic in that I could form pictographic sequences and send them to Tripod. Thus it was simple to tell her what I wanted her to do. She was a quick learner too. Within the passage of several sequences she was replying in kind. Our relationship, already very close, was further enhanced by this. We revelled in each other's company.

We experimented by testing the inherent abilities we had in spirit form. We flew several times around the planet, soaring high into the stratosphere and plunging deep into the ocean. The world no longer held secrets from us. We lingered unseen in secure areas and passed through solid walls. For a time we stood in the main vault of Fort Knox, surrounded by tons of gold. Nothing could stop us; no one could see us.

Time regression was more difficult. It was easy to spin backwards first the minutes, then the hours, then the days and finally the years. The skill of it though was to focus closely in order to stop exactly where you wanted to, otherwise you had to make adjustments in days or even years. It all wasted time.

Fortunately I had the starting point of Air Base Barksdale and the 30th August. Tripod and I lurked unseen in Barksdale's flight control tower as Air Force personnel hurried back and forth. As soon as the single plane from Minot came up on the displays I knew that it was the one.

We were aboard the Stratofortress as it taxied to the perimeter runway. I watched closely as North and his team removed the bomb. I decided that my priority must be to stay with the bomb. As North headed for his base, Tripod and I were in the back of his truck.

This was where I encountered the first surprise. All the containers were mounted on some kind of roller system that kept them constantly in motion. The last container, the one containing the bomb, had now moved through this system many times and was lost among the rest. This wasn't a problem, I reasoned, I would just look inside the containers using my spirit abilities. You can imagine my shock when I found that inside each container was an exact replica of the bomb. It was impossible for me to identify

the actual bomb. I could say that I knew roughly where it was for the moment, but should all six containers go off in different directions at a later date I would have lost it.

The 30-minute drive ended in back roads among the Louisiana swamps. At first sight Base Task Force 121 was no more than a massive field at the end of a dirt track, quite literally in the middle of nowhere. A rusty gate was swung open and both vehicles passed through. There was absolutely no security visible but I guessed that the whole area must be closely watched by electronic means.

Not far from the gate stood a large, dilapidated barn-type building. Directly behind it ran a landing strip. There were no planes of any kind, no vehicles and no people. The place looked both derelict and deserted.

As we approached the doors to the barn they swung silently open and bright lights came on inside. From their illumination I could see a steep ramp, almost the width of the barn, leading downwards. A massive, steel blast door was swung back against freshly painted corridor walls. As we passed it closed behind us.

Both vehicles stopped at a small staging area. The six Special Forces got out, to be replaced by four of the specialists. We proceeded along a brightly lit corridor on the right, while the others headed off elsewhere. I was impressed by the degree of security. Everything was being thoroughly compartmentalised.

A five-minute drive brought us to the doors of what turned out to be a large, secure storage room. I watched as North entered a code into a keyboard on one of the heavy double doors. There was a few seconds wait, then, to the accompaniment of clicks and clunks from the locking mechanism, both doors swung open.

The four specialists hurried inside and returned with a sturdy, metal gurney. North unlocked the rear compartment of the truck and the specialists lifted one of the containers out and placed it on the gurney. Then they returned to the storeroom and placed it on the heavy shelving bolted to the wall. They repeated the procedure six times until all the containers were on the shelves. As they returned to the truck, North re-entered the door code and both doors swung shut again.

I now had a severe problem. Although I still knew where the actual bomb was, I had no idea where, when or how it was to be used. The situation demanded that I follow North to try to find out more. That would mean leaving Tripod to watch the bomb. I didn't like to impose such a boring, lonely task on her, no more than I liked to be separated from her in the first place. But there really was no other alternative. Using a series of pictograms I conveyed to Tripod what I wanted her to do. She accepted it with equanimity and what sounded like a muffled bark. I headed off after North., resolving to literally stay as close to him as his own shadow.

It soon became apparent that Colonel North was running the show at Base Task Force 121. He didn't report to anyone regarding the success of his mission, nor did he have to ask permission to requisition the jet helicopter he ordered prepared. It stood in the massive underground hanger, surrounded by various other military jets and helicopters.

Hidden motors whirred and hydraulic rams squealed, as the helicopter was raised to ground level. The back doors of the barn swung open, giving clear access to the concrete runway. It taxied out and immediately took off.

Within three hours we were over Washington. I was unfamiliar with U.S. cities, but even I recognized the famous buildings and monuments. As the White House came into view, I did wonder how we had got permission to overfly it. You can imagine my surprise when we circled the building, then landed at a heli-pad.

A welcoming committee of several young men in grey suits were waiting for North. They escorted him inside the building. An armed guard was standing beside the door to an express elevator. He pressed a button, then stepped aside to allow North to enter.

The elevator descended rapidly, taking us deep underneath the White House. I guessed that this must be the nuclear bunker for the President and his staff.

The elevator stopped abruptly and we exited into a lobby where several corridors met. With no hesitation North headed off along one of the corridors and into a large room. In the middle was a smaller, room-like construction, suspended from a steel cable. Four guards carrying machine guns stood at each corner. At no point did any part of this room touch the ground, ceiling or walls surrounding it. Quite clearly, it was a top security room where a top security conversation could be carried out without fear of anyone eavesdropping.

North walked quickly up to a door in one of the room's walls. He knocked twice, opened the door and stepped inside, shutting the door after him. I immediately followed him, passing smoothly through the closed door.

There were four chairs around a circular table. North sat in one with his back to me. I quickly took in the occupants of the other three chairs and gasped in surprise. Immediately opposite me I recognized the familiar figure of Dick Cheney, Vice-President of the United States. The other two were equally familiar. To his right sat Henry Kissinger and to his left was Madelaine Albright.

Despite my shock, I suddenly realized I wasn't the only one who was surprised. As the three of them stared past North and at me, it was obvious that they could see me just as plainly as I could see them.

Suddenly, an irresistible force seized me and threw me up against one of the walls. A look of extreme concentration was fixed to their faces now as they combined to incapacitate me. North spun round in his chair to see what it was they were staring so fixedly at. Confused, he looked around wildly, not seeing anything and not knowing what was going on.

The pressure was unbearable. Not only was it squeezing me physically, it seemed to be crushing my mind. I tried to fight against it, but quickly realized that I was helpless. No doubt each of them were powerful adepts in their own right. Together they were irresistible.

At first I thought they were trying to kill me, but it was more fundamental than that. I became aware that, instead of being just a shapeless form, parts of my physical body had started to appear. First a leg and a foot appeared, closely followed by one of my arms. I was dimly aware of North now standing with his back against the far wall, a look of sheer terror on his face. The three adepts sat motionless.

Suddenly, with a scream of pain, I became fully corporeal and tumbled to the floor. I lay there paralysed as Cheney stood and bent over towards me. He reached out with a short, baton-like object in his hand and pressed a button. An excruciating shock ran through me and a sheet of blinding white light passed in front of my eyes. That was the last thing I remembered.

RENDITION

For the next few days I was lost to the world. I drifted in and out of consciousness, barely aware of my surroundings at all. There were distinct memories of my receiving injections in my upper arm. In brief periods of lucidity I noticed that my body was encased in a red, one-piece jump-suit. I was aware of being moved. Once, I was sure I was on a plane.

As I swam up to consciousness, I felt several sensations simultaneously. It was very hot, almost unbearably so. My stomach ached with an emptiness that attested to the fact that I hadn't eaten for several days. My throat was parched and dry so that I yearned for water. My wrists were on fire from the pain of their being secured behind my back by restraints that were far too tight. In short, I was in a world of pain.

I had been lying face down on the floor, a position that was both uncomfortable and hindered my breathing. As I rolled onto my side to relieve the pressure, stressed and aching muscles screamed in torment. No matter how I lay I still seemed to ache all over my body.

I managed to raise myself on my knees and surveyed my surroundings. I was in a small room with four blank and featureless walls. High up on one of them was a very small, grilled window through which came occasional blasts of hot air. I guessed it must lead outside and that, whatever country I was in, it was a very hot one.

The walls and floor of the room itself were upholstered with an off-white, plastic material, which was stuffed so that every surface gave when pressed. I had seen padded cells before, but this one was state of the art. You could throw yourself headlong into a wall here and never do yourself any harm.

There were just two items in the room, a plastic chamber pot with lid and a plastic jug three-quarters full with water. I was wearing a one-piece, red plastic jump suit, secured at the front by a long zip. Underneath I was naked.

Several years had now passed since I had left prison, yet at times it seemed like yesterday. They do say that the experience never leaves you and it most certainly hadn't left me. As I took stock of my new environment, all the old feelings came rushing back.

First amongst them was despair. To be taken out of a stimulating environment and thrown into one devoid of any stimuli at all caused the mind to panic. Freedom was all about instant gratification. Imprisonment was all about tolerating the intolerable, and for long periods of time too. Mentally I took a deep breath, a useful trick learned in prison, and reassured myself that the experience would not kill me. Time would pass, as time always did, and I would emerge at the end, weaker in some ways, but in others stronger.

Rage was a secondary emotion I was now feeling, although at the moment it was only in the fledgling stage. However, unless controlled and contained it could easily spiral out of control. That might be good for one's spirit of resistance, but there were bigger fish to fry here than merely my personal survival. My continuing mission was to thwart those who now had the nuclear weapon. Everything else had to be subservient to that, including self-survival and pride.

With that firmly in mind, I managed to climb to my feet and began to pace around the room. From simple acts of physical discipline came significant gains in mental discipline. It was what had got me through my 24 years inside, although at times I had taken it to extreme levels.

I don't know if someone had been watching me, but hardly had I began to pace the room than the door flew open. In marched an officer in military fatigues, followed by several servicemen of lower rank, similarly attired. He stopped and the others fanned out around him in a semi-circle.

“Prisoner to attention”, shouted the officer, at a volume usually employed to address troops on parade. He could only have been addressing me though, so I stopped abruptly and turned to face him.

“I’m Colonel James, William H. James”, he continued at a shout. “I’m the base commander here. Can you tell me, boy, why you’re so Goddamn important? Can you tell me why I have to be present every time we unlock your door? Can you tell me why I’ve got to babysit your sorry ass, son?”

For a brief moment I considered telling him the whole story, then rejected the idea out of hand. Even if he did believe it, what could he do? He was a dedicated member of the Armed Forces. At the end of the day he would always obey orders from a superior. Could I really expect him to stand up against the Vice-President of the United States purely on my word?

“Colonel, I can’t help you,” I replied. “I honestly don’t know what I’m doing here. And by the way, where am I, Colonel?”

“Where are you?” the Colonel countered my question with a question. “I’ll tell you where you are, son. You’re at the ass-end of the world. You’re in an ante-chamber to Hell. In the unlikely event of your surviving the experience, it will be something you will remember for the rest of your sorry life. We own your ass, boy. We decide if you live or die.”

I let the tirade wash over me. From what the Colonel had said I gathered that I was in some kind of secret penal establishment run by the U.S. military. There had been rumours about them for years. The camp at Guantanamo Bay was just one prison right out in the open. So the story went, there was a chain of such places, located in the most unlikely countries. And because nobody knew about them, the regimes were characterized by torture and summary execution.

Perhaps the Colonel had taken my silence for fear. Quite clearly he had been ordered to ensure my safety, at least until after I had been thoroughly interrogated. “You hungry, boy?” he asked in a conversational tone.

“Very hungry, Colonel”, I answered, then hesitated. “But...I don’t eat meat, just chicken and fish, Colonel”, I added as an afterthought.

“Good Goddamn”, shouted the Colonel turning to his men, “Did you hear that boys? This prisoner is on a special diet. We’ve got prisoners starving to death here, but this one don’t eat meat.”

The Colonel turned back and fixed me with a hard look, as if he was trying to determine whether I was taking the rise out of him. Whatever he saw it seemed to satisfy him. “One of you men, go and get the prisoner a meal. And make sure it ain’t meat”, he shouted over his shoulder.

They must have had a food trolley nearby, for within seconds one of the men returned with a meal on a plastic tray. He held the tray out with one hand as he offered me a set of plastic knife, fork and spoon with the other.

“Well undo his hands first, you idiot”, shouted the Colonel. “How’s he gonna eat with his hands tied behind his back?”

The serviceman pulled a pair of sturdy scissors from his fatigues pocket, went behind me and cut through the plastic ties that bound my hands. It was a blissful release. Sore hands, starved from lack of blood, began to regain some feeling. I reached out and took the tray with both hands, fearing I would drop it if I used just one. I sat down and started to eat.

The food was good, but I was so hungry that I would have wolfed down slops. As I ate I noticed that the Colonel had propped himself up against a wall and was regarding me.

Noticing my look he offered, “Yes, boy, that’s another part of my orders concerning you. I’ve got to personally supervise your every activity while you are unlocked. You must be one important mother-fucker, son.”

As I finished the meal the tray was taken from me. My chamber pot was taken out and emptied and the water jug was refilled with fresh water. A clean red jump-suit was handed to me and I had to hand over the old one. Then they all went out and shut the door. I was left to reflect on the episode in solitude.

This was to be the routine then. Each day, twice a day, I was fed, my pot emptied, my water jug replenished and a clean jump-suit handed to me. Every second day I was allowed to shower. On each occasion the Colonel was in close attendance.

I did have one other regular visitor, but no one other than myself was aware of the event. It was at the end of my first day in the padded cell and I was still drifting in and out of consciousness due to the effects of the drugs I had been given. I was aware of a train of thought that involved Tripod. However, such was the power of the drugs still in my system that I dismissed it as just another drug-induced illusion.

Suddenly, right in front of my eyes, my chamber pot started to move of its own volition. First the plastic lid rotated, then the whole pot moved from left to right across my line of vision. It was enough to bring me fully conscious. I sat up and looked around the cell. I was still on my own.

By now my mind had cleared enough to receive a clear thought. The pictogram had me on my knees in the cell with a blurry form that was clearly Tripod hovering above me.

“Tripod, is that you”, I heard myself blurt out. There was, of course, no reply. Instead I had a very clear vision of Tripod and myself back in Eden. Then the first pictogram returned. It was enough to confirm to me that Tripod was indeed present, albeit in spirit form.

There was an immediate explosion of emotion as we both reacted to being together again. Tripod showed concern for my physical condition, but I reassured her that, despite a certain fuzziness of mind, not to mention a high degree of concern about the situation, I was quite well.

I ran through the episode where I confronted Cheney, Kissinger and Albright in the White House basement, but Tripod already knew. She explained that shortly after I had left with North, all six of the containers had been taken off to different destinations. Not knowing which one contained the actual nuclear warhead, she had decided to come after me. She back-tracked in time to the point where I had left with North and had followed us.

In retrospect, she had witnessed the confrontation and confirmed that the Master had identified three of the four as very powerful adepts, skilled in the Black Arts. North was a mere mortal and nothing more than a glorified errand boy. Cheney, Kissinger and Albright though were three extremely senior figures in the most powerful coven behind the U.S. Government. The Master’s instructions were that we should follow the movements of Cheney, because he was instrumental to the plot involving the weapon.

The Master had also determined that time was of the essence now. The signs were all there to see. The weapon had been taken at the very end of August. Logic dictated that the conspirators wouldn’t want to wait too long before using it, so the Master had searched for a significant date in the Black calendar. He didn’t have to look far. October 31st fell exactly two calendar months after the theft. Halloween had become something of a joke within Western culture, but many serious religions celebrated it as the eve of All Saints Day or the Day of the Dead. Certainly within the Black Magic calendar it was

a day of great power. The Master had concluded that the plot involving the bomb would be sprung then, probably in conjunction with a ceremony.

The timing raised definite problems for me and my situation. Tripod and I had entered the Earth dimension in spirit form at the time of the September full moon. Even though the three adepts had forced me into corporeal form well before the end of the current lunar cycle, the 'Old Laws' still held. I wouldn't be able to transform myself into spirit form until the October full moon. This fell only five days before October 31st and All Saints Eve. Thus I would have very little time before the ceremony.

I did ask why the Master couldn't do what the three adepts had done and force me from one form to the other. Tripod explained that, once again, it was all to do with the 'Old Laws'. All magic for powers was evil, so such action was unacceptable to him. However, he was working on another strategy that just might release me before the appointed day.

It was extremely frustrating, and not only because I would probably be subjected to some form of torture to force me to tell what I knew long before then. Even though I now had the company of Tripod, she would be able to do nothing to help me. I wanted to spare her the stress of my ordeal, so I conveyed to her that the first priority was to watch Cheney closely. However, I impressed on her the need for great caution. She could never be close to him in small rooms, but rather should watch him from a distance in quite crowded places. I instructed her to identify the head of Cheney's security guard and to follow him instead. Wherever the latter was, Cheney wouldn't be far away.

Even though I was trying hard to keep track of time, in the absence of clocks one day seemed to easily merge into another. Therefore, I wasn't completely sure, but somewhere about the fourth day North showed up in the company of Cheney. I had been expecting the former, but the presence of the latter was a considerable surprise. If nothing else it confirmed to me the degree of importance Cheney placed on my sudden appearance in the White House basement.

I already had my strategy figured out for North, but it was a strategy to fool someone without paranormal powers. Cheney was a different kettle of fish entirely. He could, quite literally, see right through me. Nevertheless, I could hardly admit that I was aware of the nuclear warhead plot. That would ensure my certain death.

"That will be all, Colonel. You can leave us now", said North to Colonel James. The latter backed out of the cell reluctantly, curiosity to find out why I was such an important prisoner written all over his face.

I had climbed to my feet as the cell door opened. I stood, hands behind my back, trying to appear as unconcerned as possible. There was an awkward silence as North looked me up and down and Cheney fixed me with a piercing stare.

"So you're not the invisible man today then", began North with thinly veiled sarcasm.

"I apologise if I frightened you the other day", I responded.

"Oh you certainly did that", continued North. "I would have been here sooner but there were enquiries to be made. You're a very interesting man, Norman Parker. If you can be called a man, that is."

"I suppose I do owe you an explanation." I was trying to sound both reasonable and naïve.

North smiled. "Well it had better be a good one. You see, we've run you through our files and you don't exist. And we've got files on just about everybody on the planet. Fortunately you gave us a clue in the manner of your sudden appearance. So we checked your finger-prints against the deceased files. You proved a perfect match with those of a Norman Parker, who died several years ago in a car accident in Spain."

North paused to gauge my reaction before continuing. "So we went to Spain and exhumed the body. It was very badly burned and smashed up, but we got a good DNA sample. And guess what? It is a perfect match with your own."

North paused again. He seemed to be enjoying himself now and turned to Cheney as if for approval. The latter stared unflinchingly at me and said nothing.

"So there's several things you need to explain", said North as he turned back to me. "When he died, Norman Parker was fifty years old. You have the body of a man barely half that age. So it seems that, not only have you come back from the dead, you've come back as a young man. Neat trick. Wouldn't mind learning that one myself. So what's your explanation?"

I was speaking to North, but my mind was fully on Cheney's reaction. "I really don't understand it myself", I began. "All I know is that one moment I was in a car crash, the next I was a disembodied spirit. And have been so for several years now."

"So why did you turn up at the White House?" interrupted Cheney abruptly.

It was important to try to sound spontaneous, so I replied immediately. "Sometimes I get a kick out of being in places I shouldn't. Places where ordinary people can never go. I was at the White House when I saw the helicopter land. People rushed inside as if on important business. I decided to follow, hoping I might witness something historic. That's when you saw me. I don't understand what happened next."

"There's no way to check that one way or the other", said Cheney to North. "Tell the interrogators to get what they can out of him. When he's ready to change his story he can send a message to you. We're done here."

As they left the cell North called over his shoulder, "So don't forget, Norman Parker, or whoever you are. When you're ready to talk, send us a message." Then they were gone.

Twenty minutes passed and the door burst open. Colonel James entered at a run, accompanied by six servicemen.

"Ahh", shouted James. "Now you're mine. Short of killing you right away, I can do what I like with you. And what I like, you won't like at all."

I was seized bodily by several pairs of hands and carried out of the cell. "This is just to give you some idea of what we've got on offer here" cried James as they took me down a long passage way. There were cells either side, all with their doors open. I was immediately aware of shouts, curses, cries of pain and screams of sheer terror. I realized that my own cell was also special in that it was sound-proof. That was the only explanation of why I hadn't heard this Hellish cacophony before.

Like some bizarre tour guide, James stopped at each cell to explain what was going on. In the first cell a naked man was suspended by the ankles from a chain fixed to the ceiling. Four servicemen surrounded him, taking turns to punch, kick and hit him with batons. His body was covered with angry red welts and blood ran freely from his mouth. Every so often a cry of pain would break through the wailing, sobbing sound he was making.

All the servicemen were thoroughly absorbed in what they were doing and remained oblivious to our presence. A frightened-looking man of Arab extraction, dressed in civilian clothes, stood in the corner of the cell. Each time the tortured man cried out in Arabic, one of the servicemen would call out to the Arab, "What's he saying, Ahmed? Will he tell us anything?" The Arab looked at us briefly then dropped his eyes to the floor.

The next cell was like a butcher's shop. A naked man was tied down to a metal, blood-smeared table. Again there were four interrogators, but this time one of them was a servicewoman. In her hands she had a pair of blood-stained garden shears. To shouts of

encouragement from the men, she fixed one of the tied man's fingers between the blades and pressed the handles together with all her might. Frenzied screams escaped the tied man as, with a crunching sound, another blood-stained finger fell to the floor to join a growing pile of other severed fingers. The three servicemen broke out into a ragged cheer.

In the cell opposite, a naked man lay alone on the floor. The eyes wide and staring, the mouth open in a silent scream, all attested to the fact that he was dead. "One off here. One off here. Take the empties out", cried James to no one in particular. Two servicemen appeared as if from nowhere, grabbed the body roughly and dragged it away along the corridor.

"Now here's something that you should take careful notice of." James addressed me as we stood outside another cell. "The Japs used it a lot in World War Two. We call it water-boarding. You actually feel like you're drowning. I say to take note 'cause it's the first thing we're gonna use on you."

An Arab man was tied down to a table that was tilted up so that his head was lower than his feet. Four servicemen stood close by as an Arab interpreter asked the tied man questions in Arabic. The interpreter looked up and shook his head, indicating that he was having no success. The four servicemen stepped in closer.

A wet towel was placed over the prisoner's face and held in place by two servicemen. Two more lifted a large, plastic water container and began to pour the contents onto the wet towel. Gasping, spluttering sounds came from the prisoner as his body thrashed about on the table. At a signal from one of the servicemen holding the towel, the container was placed on the floor and the towel removed. The prisoner's face was contorted as he tried desperately to breathe. Quite involuntarily, he regurgitated mouthfuls of swallowed water.

There must have been a dozen cells along the corridor and in each a similar scenario played itself out. Fresh-faced, clean-cut young servicemen and servicewomen laboured to perpetrate abominations on helpless prisoners. If they were affected in any way it wasn't immediately apparent. To the background of a devil's chorus of screams and pleadings, they carried on regardless, pausing only to exhort their comrades to greater excesses.

Further along, the corridor it opened out into a large room. Eight tables were dotted equidistantly apart, each with its complement of four service personnel and one Arab interpreter. A prisoner was tied to each table.

"This is what I call the humiliation factor", chipped in James. "Some prisoners are more affected by being tortured publicly. And in the case of Arab men, especially if the people doing it are women." So saying he pointed to a nearby table where all the service personnel were women.

"This is an interesting situation", he continued. "The fat guy the women are servicing is an influential Imam. The youth on the next table is his son. You can bet your life that the worst thing for the fat guy is to be naked in front of the women." James broke off with a ragged laugh.

The Imam was a big man, fully twenty stones in weight. His long, black beard hung down the side of the table, nearly touching the floor. The four women had affixed some wires to his genitals. They trailed across the table to a box with a handle. As one of the women turned the handle the Imam's body contorted and a scream escaped his lips.

Almost immediately, his voice came clear and strong and in perfect English. "Ibrahim, Ibrahim, be strong my son. Allah will punish the infidel for this blasphemy. This pain will be merely temporary. Try to transcend it. Soon we will both pass into paradise."

His son could have been no more than thirteen. His frail body, stretched across the table seemed as scrawny as a chicken's. He screamed unrestrainedly as his torturers crushed his fingers in some metal contraption. Between his screams deep sobs wracked his body.

Despite my horror at what I was seeing, especially in the knowledge that this was what lay in store for me, I couldn't help but reflect on the nature of the people who were doing it. For all his bluster, James was the epitome of the career military officer. No doubt he had served with pride in combat assignments. So how did he justify the disgusting criminality of what he was involved in here? Perhaps he had a wife and, possibly, children. What would he say to them if they knew what he was doing? Would he try to justify it by saying it was all part of the war against terror? And what about the terror that he was an everyday part of?

The young servicemen and women were even more problematic. How did you train people, prepare people, to carry out what were, in effect, serious war crimes? What was it in their small town American backgrounds that lent itself so easily to the role of fiendish torturer. Call them enemy combatants if you will, but for the most part the victims were civilians.

Then, almost as an epiphany, it all fell into place for me. It made perfect sense for some of the most powerful people in America to be Satanists. Who other than Satanists could promote policies that deliberately led to so much death and destruction? What insight the Mullahs must have had when they called America the Great Satan, but then it was much easier for those outside the culture to see the truth.

America had turned greed into a virtue and selfishness into a creed. Screw the other guy before he can screw you. Never give a sucker an even break. The populace had been bought by a surfeit of material things. As long as they enjoyed a high standard of living they didn't give a damn about others, especially if they were foreigners and of colour. Thus the service personnel torturers of Colonel James were neither Satanists nor inherently evil. They were just inherently selfish and totally lacking in human empathy.

"And now for you." Colonel James' interruption brought me out of my reverie. "It's not that you've got a choice", he continued, "but now you know exactly what we can work through until you tell us what we want to hear. And everybody does, eventually, tell us what we want to hear, boy."

James could have saved his breath. He was preaching to the converted. After what I had just seen I could fully understand any human being telling James' torturers absolutely anything, to stop them doing whatever it was they were doing to the individual at that moment. It also brought me to wondering just how long I could hold out myself until I told them everything about the nuke plot, even though that might be the end of me. In the circumstances, death might be a welcome release.

"Water-board him", shouted James to no one in particular.

Four hefty servicemen picked me up bodily, tore my red jumpsuit off and slammed me naked onto a metal table. I felt unseen hands fastening restraining straps around my wrists and ankles. I tried to prepare myself mentally for what was to come.

"What the fuck!!" The words, in a strong, Southern US accent, seemed to come out of nowhere and rose above the background hubbub of Arabic cries and curses. All four of the men restraining me turned their heads to look in the direction of the voice. They immediately responded with a chorus of gasps and amazed cries. Torturers at other tables stopped what they were doing and looked across.

I strained at my restraints as I raised my body to look at whatever held their attention. It was something to do with the table with the Imam on. One of his ears had been severed and a small river of blood poured freely down the side of his head. But this was

not what gripped his four women torturers' attention. They stood with their backs to him as they gazed fixedly in the direction of a small table which held the instruments they had been using.

Then I saw it. A long-bladed knife, still caked with the Imam's blood, seemed to be hovering unsupported, two feet above the table where the rest of the torture instruments lay. No one was holding it. Nothing was attached to it. Yet it seemed to be defying the laws of gravity with absolutely no good reason. Then I, alone, also saw what had to be the reason.

Hovering in the air above the table, but unseen by everybody except myself, was a small gray cloudy configuration that I clearly recognized to be Tripod. We hadn't discussed any tactics she might employ to help me in the military prison, because there just weren't any we could think of, what with her being in spirit form and me in the corporeal world. Quite obviously though, Tripod had come up with a strategy of her own. I wondered what she was up to. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

Suddenly, the knife accelerated at amazing speed. In a blur of motion it flew across the room and there was a piercing scream close by. I looked up to see Colonel James with both hands up to his face, blood pouring through his fingers. The knife had plunged to the hilt into his eye socket, then retracted, to hover again in the air. Colonel James' knees slowly buckled and he fell to the floor, his one remaining eye staring lifelessly at the ceiling.

For a long second nobody moved. Then there was pandemonium as all the service personnel sprinted for the exit gate. Whatever they had seen in training or combat, they had never seen anything like this. They had all witnessed extreme violence, but it had invariably come about in a logical way. There was no explanation for the incident they had just witnessed and that was what had truly shaken them.

Tables were knocked over and instruments sent flying across the floor, as the forty-strong mob surged towards the corridor. But the knife was on the move too. Almost too fast for the eye to follow, it thrust this way and slashed that way, always striking a vital spot.

Two of the four-strong women's crew were hit across their necks, slicing open main arteries. As their life's blood spouted in gouts, fingers helplessly tried to staunch the flow. Within seconds they slumped against walls, leaving broad bloody smears as testimony to their journey to the floor and oblivion.

The men weren't spared either. They clutched blindly behind them as the blade embedded itself deep into their backs. One, two, three times the blade entered and retracted. Each time men fell to the floor, mortally wounded. As the last man exited the building, the gate was left wide open. Behind him, ten of his comrades lay dead or dying on the floor.

For the vast majority of the torture victims it must have been a mystery as to why everybody had so suddenly run out. All of us were still bound to our tables by restraining straps, so we couldn't investigate the phenomenon in any way. It did occur to me that, in the light of what had just happened, this was probably just as well. The authorities would certainly be looking for a culprit for the ten corpses. They would hardly be satisfied with merely a knife.

A good twenty minutes passed. Then, moving very slowly and deliberately, a ten-strong team entered through the still-open gate. They were covered from head to toe in heavy body armour, visors, helmets and gloves. Not one square inch of flesh was visible. All were heavily armed with automatic weapons. They were clearly taking this incident extremely seriously.

As they passed through an area, they posted a man to guard it. They fanned out across the open space that was the main torture room, weapons cocked and ready to fire. Already traumatized torture victims stared open mouthed at this new and terrifying phenomenon as it passed.

Soon though, it was clear that, other than the prisoners tied to the tables, there was no one else in the building. They immediately turned their attention to the ten corpses strewn about. Each was given a brief examination. As soon as it was determined that they were all dead, they too were ignored.

The team leader unbuttoned his visor and pointed at one of his team, who immediately did the same. "Now tell me exactly what happened again", said the team leader to the man, who had obviously been one of the original torturers who had fled for his life. The man, clearly still in shock, gave a rambling account involving a knife with a mind of its own and comrades who had panicked and fled.

He finished with passion, but, the team leader still didn't look convinced. He spoke quietly into the radio he was carrying, obviously reporting back to someone. Then, turning to his men, he called out in a firm voice, "Go to stage two, stage two."

His men moved quickly from table to table and from cell to cell, unfastening straps and removing prisoners from their tables. Soon everyone was back in his respective cell, apart from myself and two others.

I was handcuffed and, still naked, firmly held by four of the squad over in a corner. The two remaining prisoners were still tied to their tables. I began to wonder what was in store for them.

The team leader walked over to the table where the long-bladed knife lay. He picked it up in his gloved hand, then returned to the two prisoners and severed the straps that held them. Warily, rubbing their sore wrists, they climbed off their tables. The team leader shooed them gently over into a corner, where they stood, self-consciously trying to hide their private parts with their hands.

As he walked briskly back to his men, he called out, "Stage three, go to stage three."

Two men stepped smartly out of the ranks, swung up their machine pistols and fired, all in one smooth movement. The two prisoners in the corner fell, riddled with bullets. The team leader walked back and threw the long-bladed knife on top of one of the bodies. "Photographs, photographs", he called out over his shoulder and another of his men began to take photos of the scene.

Then he turned his attention to me. "We can't prove it Mister Norman Parker, but we've got a strong suspicion that this recent incident was something to do with you. Fortunately for you though, certain people in high places want you kept alive. Otherwise you'd be in the corner with the patsies right now. We do have something else for you though and we think it will concentrate your mind wonderfully, as well as keeping you out of trouble. I hope you like water..."

He turned on his heel and walked away. Immediately, the four men holding me picked me up and I was carried after him. We went out of the building, across a sandy yard and into a low, modern-looking building that wouldn't have looked out of place in a university faculty, except for the fact that it had absolutely no windows.

We passed through several locked gates manned by armed guards, before entering a large room with a very low ceiling. At first sight it seemed empty, but on closer inspection you could see that, at regular intervals, large trap doors were set in the floor. We stopped abruptly by one of these trap doors.

Buttons were pressed and hidden machinery whirred as the trap door opened upwards and outwards. There was a secondary whirring and a strange apparatus, dripping with water, rose out of the blackness of the room below.

There was something that definitely looked like a seat, located in the middle of a metallic spine. At the bottom of the spine the framework forked out into a V-shape, with a restraining strap at the end of each fork of the Vee. Near the top of the spine was fixed a cross-member, at each end of which were fixed two more restraining straps. As someone who had spent much of his life in gymnasiums, at first sight it could have been some sort of exercise machine. But even with all my experience I could discern no purpose for this apparatus.

It was as they walked me closer that it all fell into place. I looked into the maw of the open trap door and saw light glinting on top of the water below. "Sensory deprivation", I said to myself and smiled a grim smile. They were going to strap me to this apparatus and lower me into the tank of water below.

It was futile to resist and I actually stepped into the metal framework to help. Unseen hands fastened my hands and feet to it and, with further whirring of machinery, I was lowered into the water, which was agreeably warm. I was left with just my head and neck protruding out of the water. The rest of me completely submerged. With one final turning of machinery, the trap door closed again, leaving me in impenetrable blackness.

My first priority was to establish self control. I told myself that this would be no different from the many years of solitary confinement I had done while serving my life sentence, except that the actual sensory deprivation would be far more extreme. The water was at body temperature. My spine, arms and legs, which at first had rested on the framework, had now floated off, supported by the water. With no tactile signals returning to my brain from anything other than my hands and feet, I was already losing contact with most of the rest of my body.

The darkness was so deeply black it seemed like a kind of blindness. I longed to test out my sight but it was impossible and eventually I just closed my eyes. My ears were fully functional, perhaps even more so than usual, and I could hear my breathing clearly. "Fuck, fuck, fuck", I uttered the profanity to prove to myself that I could still speak. I would spend long hours discoursing with famous figures from history, a useful trick I had learned in prison. At other times I would sing every song I knew.

But there would also be long, silent periods of reflection. My brain would float free of its bodily constraints and try to connect with the collective consciousness of the universe. As long as I could maintain some kind of fiction that there was actually something going on, some stimuli, then I would survive.

However, the moment the reality struck that this was little better than the silence of the grave, then the mind would shatter. A man could easily go mad in this environment. That was why, in properly conducted university experiments, student volunteers could press a panic button should things get too much for them. Then they would be removed from the tank within seconds. There was no panic button for me. I would just have to somehow endure it all until the next full moon on the 26th of October. Then I could change into spirit form and be free again.

That eventuality might be fine for me, but it would be disastrous for the mission. According to the Master, all the action would take place between the 31st of October and the first of November. I wouldn't be able to change into spirit form and escape from the tank until the 26th. Then there was the distinct possibility that I would need to do something that required me to be in corporeal form. It seemed that we were doomed and that there was no force in the universe that could get me out of this sensory deprivation tank by normal means before the end of the month.

THE GENERAL

Subsequent events were to prove that I was quite wrong in this latter assertion. In fact there was such a force and he was deliberating on the matter at that very moment. Colin Peters had been very much focused on the events at Minot from their very inception. With his illustrious and extensive background in the US military he, probably better than most people, realized the sheer ridiculousness of the explanations being offered by officials. Whatever the reason for the nukes being moved, a mistake could not have been among them. Apart from any other consideration, Peters knew that every war-head was electronically monitored. If the war-head was moved it would be tracked.

Peters also knew that powerful forces were afoot here. Anyone who could circumvent the military chain of command in this manner held a phenomenal degree of power within the country. People like this could not be openly confronted. That would be a recipe for disaster. Peters knew he would have to move carefully, through people he had come to trust implicitly. But he did know that he had to do something. The day when someone could illicitly move nuclear weapons about the United States was the day he stopped serving his country. And that day hadn't arrived yet.

Peters had been all over the Minot investigation. It was child's play to include his people in the teams without arousing suspicion. Colonels Emig, Critchlow and Freeman had all folded under the first application of pressure. Thus Peters came to learn about Colonel Casey North and his Task Force 121 working under the auspices of the Joint Special Operations Command.

It came as no surprise to him that Cheney's office was behind it. It had been people like Cheney in the Bush administration that had caused him to leave the Government. When civilians started playing at being generals, without having the necessary background knowledge or mindset that went with it, then you could expect disaster. The whole neo-con thing had been an outrage. No one had cast so much as a single vote for these people, yet they were virtually running policy.

Peters had also heard of Task Force 121. There had been rumours of an extremely high powered executive assassination team, taking out heads of government. Rafik Hariri in Lebanon had reportedly been a target, as had Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. Peters hated this blurring of the lines between diplomacy and war. How could the US claim to be a nation of laws when it went around murdering democratically elected foreign Heads of State? He had fought such things all his career and would continue to do so until the day he died.

Colonel Casey North though was an enigma. He had been travelling under the radar for several years now and no one seemed to know anything about him. What was quite clear from the meeting he had held with the Minot colonels was that he was obviously Cheney's man. Whereas it was very difficult to follow every word and deed of the Vice President of the United States, it was another matter entirely to deep surveillance one USAF Colonel. In future, every time Colonel Casey North took so much as a crap, Peters would know about it. He felt that if he was to stay on the trail of the missing nuke, then Colonel Casey held the key to it.

As the Saudi airlines Airbus 320 leveled out to land at Jedda, Dr Samir Masiri felt his pulse quicken. It was a number of things. This would be his first visit to Mecca and as a devout Muslim it would be one of the defining moments of his life. He wished he had been able to delay the trip for a month and take part in the Hajj celebrations, but that hadn't been possible. There had been work commitments as well as his government not

wanting him to become embroiled in any problems that often occurred during the official celebrations. Relations between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran were especially fraught right now. They didn't want one of their key nuclear physicists caught up in an international incident.

This then was the second cause of his nervousness. With Iran's nuclear program being so much in the news right now, even his traveling to Mecca could be a news-worthy event. He had been given special instructions to keep a low profile. He was only to take part in mainstream events and not engage in anything that was in the slightest bit controversial. Samir wholeheartedly echoed this sentiment. He was by nature reserved and timid. The anonymity of academic life suited him well. He was nearing forty, yet he still wasn't married.

The nervousness was there again as he approached Saudi customs. With one brief swipe of his passport they would know exactly who he was. Yet as bad as relations were between Saudi Arabia and Iran, they hadn't deteriorated to the extent that they harassed each other's nationals. Just as he suspected, his passport was given but a cursory inspection and he was waved through.

Now he could enjoy the adventure properly. He exited the terminal and hailed a taxi for the forty five kilometer drive to Mecca. This would give him time to relax and to prepare himself mentally. This was to be, first and foremost, a spiritual experience. He thought of the several clean sets of Ihram in his suitcase and the sandals that went with them. Mentally he visualized himself dressed as a pilgrim, circling the Ka'bah with the other pilgrims. Almost before he knew it, he had arrived at the hotel.

He had considered staying at the Intercontinental. He could certainly afford to do so on his salary and it was, after all, a very special occasion. But people at the Ministry had advised him that it wasn't wise to make such a show of himself. The Zim Zam Tower was less expensive and much more discreet.

Check in was merely a formality. Within minutes he was in the express elevator, rising swiftly towards his room. His suite was luxurious. For one second it jarred with the purpose of his visit. Being a pilgrim smacked of being humble and poor, which hardly squared with the excess of this suite. However, he rationalized that it would have been impossible to find a poor people's hotel at such short notice and with an acceptable degree of security. So he pushed such ideas from his mind.

Alone now, he decided to try out one of his Ihram's. He prepared to undress before showering. One should be completely clean before putting on the holy garment. He had barely removed his jacket when there was a knock at the door. Slightly annoyed, he went over and opened it. One of the staff in hotel livery was standing there. With him were two men in blue boiler-suit type overalls, also with the hotel logo on them.

Apologies were made and it was explained that there had been a complaint from the room below that water was coming through the ceiling. It would only take a moment but it would be necessary to check his bathroom.

Samir acquiesced and turned away to begin unpacking his bags. His whole body went into spasm as one of the men in the boiler suits touched him lightly on the neck with a short baton. Then, together with the other man in the boiler suit, they caught him before he could fall unconscious to the floor.

The man in hotel livery produced a needle and he was injected in his upper arm as the others taped his hands and feet together. There was another knock at the door and in came a fourth man dragging a large portmanteau. He was followed into the room by Colonel Casey North.

I was a long way out now. Day had merged into night, which had merged into the following day, so much so that I had completely lost track of time. It was only those fleeting visits from Tripod that brought me back to a semblance of reality.

In order to protect my besieged sanity, I had retreated into the castle, pulled up the draw-bridge and gone to stand on the battlements, surveying that great body of the human race that I was no longer a part of. At times it made me feel safe and oh so strong.

Loneliness, like some insidious coldness, had invaded every part of me so that I yearned for human company. Only the warmth of another soul could delay the advancing chill. I fought the increasing realization that I was inevitably spiraling downwards towards madness or spiritual death.

Strangely, Tripod's reassurance that in one more day's time it would be full moon, excited me not at all. It was as if this deep loneliness was now an integral part of me and would remain so, whatever the physical environment. Further, the prospect of being in spirit form was not a welcome one. I was sure that I would have to be fully corporeal to carry out the ongoing mission successfully.

I had been day-dreaming, as was increasingly my preferred mode of consciousness. Eyes shut, mouth half open, I floated like some disembodied spirit, the impenetrable blackness cocooning me against the intrusion of any physical reality.

The brightness struck me and brought me fully awake. I didn't have to open my eyes to know that the trap door was open. As I looked though I saw the familiar face of one of the servicemen who attended to the tanks. Normally he opened the trap twice a day to give me food and water. From the looks on the faces of him and his companion I could tell that this wasn't one of the normal openings.

"C'mon buddy, out you come", he called as he and his companion lifted me out of the tank. But I had no control over my limbs and my legs folded beneath me. I was held aloft as a wheel-chair was placed for me to sit in. Then, with a heavy towel wrapped around me, I was lowered into the chair.

It was all very unusual. This was the first time I had been taken out of the tank since first I was placed in it. My mind raced to try to figure out what was in store for me. After the mental stasis of the tank it was all quite overwhelming.

I was wheeled out of the large room where the tanks were, along a corridor and into a small office. Behind an empty table sat an elderly man in civilian clothes. Below the lapel of his jacket were pinned several medals. His face was expressionless, although I had the distinct feeling that I had seen him before somewhere.

He smiled bleakly at me, then waved his hand to indicate to the servicemen that he wanted to be left alone with me. They exited, closing the door behind them.

There was a long silence. Then he fixed me with a penetrating stare, as if he was questioning the reality of what he was looking at. With a grunt he pulled a thick file from a bag near his feet and hefted it onto the table. He looked backwards and forwards from the file to myself, again as if he was measuring the man against the detail in the file.

"Are you warm enough?" His voice was surprisingly warm and concerned.

"Yes sir, thank you sir. It's not cold in the tanks."

"And how're you bearing up in there?" Again the query was tinged with concern.

"It's not easy, sir. It's never easy", I replied.

"I shouldn't think that it is", he continued, "and if it puts your mind at ease, you have my word that you won't be going back in there again."

The words didn't really register. The blackness of the tank had become so much a part of my life now that I could hardly conceive of life without it. I had switched off so

many levels of human experience I feared that I would not be able to switch them back on again. The mere thought of mixing with other humans in social interaction was quite overwhelming.

I must have slipped into a state of reverie, because I heard him calling to me. I snapped out of it and sat bolt upright in the chair. "I'm sorry about that. It does have quite an effect on you", I offered.

"Do you know who I am?" he suddenly asked.

I stared more closely at him and, although the face did elicit memories, I couldn't put a name to it. "No, I'm sorry. I don't", I confessed.

He laughed. "I suppose I should be offended. I am quite famous in the United States. You, though, are an Englishman, so perhaps you can be forgiven. I'm Colin Peters. Does that ring a bell now?"

"Is that General Peters? the surprise was clear in my voice.

"Well I'm a retired General now, but people still call me General Peters", he said, smiling broadly.

My mind was racing very fast now. I recalled that Colin Peters had become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and had then gone on to be the first black Secretary of State. Although a Republican, at times he had seemed to transcend party lines. If there was such a thing as an elder statesman in the US, respected by many and disliked by few, then that man was Colin Peters. I began to see a way out of my dilemma.

"General Peters, you've come to see me at just the right time", I stated forcefully.

"I'm beginning to think that I have", replied the General. "Yet I didn't actually come here to see you. I've been all over a guy called Colonel Casey North. That name ring any bells with you?"

"Very much so, General", I nodded in agreement.

"Well he brought an Iranian guy here several days ago. A nuclear physicist working on the Iranian nuclear program. They put him in the tanks, but haven't asked him for any information. Instead they've just told him that, when the time comes, he will say whatever they tell him to say. Otherwise he'll die in the tanks. That make any sense to you?" the puzzlement was clear in the General's voice.

It came to me immediately. "General", I began, "you need to know the whole picture, but for the moment try this. You must know that they've got a nuclear weapon from Minot Base. You probably realize that they intend to detonate it in some American city. They need to blame it on some outside force. I believe that they will have this Iranian guy all over the media saying that Iran has 'suitcase' nuclear bombs in American cities. Then, when the Minot bomb goes off, they can blame it on Iran."

Peters sat deep in thought for several minutes. Then he turned his attention back to me. He put his hand on the file in front of him. "This is all about you", he patted the file. "It's pretty unbelievable stuff. Want to explain?"

I quickly came to a decision. I would have to take a chance and tell him everything. I fully realized that the sticking point could well be the supernatural events. However, no doubt that was all detailed in the file in front of him.

I briefly touched on my time with the Master of Light in the other dimension. I didn't feel it necessary to tell him about Tripod, thinking it would only complicate matters. His interest pricked up when I told about bursting into the meeting between Cheney, Kissinger, Albright and North at the White House. He listened with interest as I back-tracked to describe how the warhead was taken by North and his team from Barksdale Base. There was concern on his face as I related how six identical containers had gone in different directions and I had lost track of the actual bomb. Alarm clearly registered

when I told him of the Master's belief that an important celebration of the Black Mass would be held on All Saints Eve, preparatory to a nuclear strike.

"What can we do?" the General's voice was thick with concern.

"I don't know what you can do, except perhaps to locate the missing warhead", I replied immediately. "For myself, I believe that my mission is to somehow disrupt the Black Mass ceremony at a crucial point."

"How can I assist you in that?" queried the General.

"I don't believe that you can", I said with resignation. "No more than I can assist you in the search for the warhead. However, with the assistance of the Master of Light, I do have a chance."

"Is there nothing I can do for you", pressed the General. "We must make sure to keep in touch."

"Well perhaps you can get me back to Washington", I replied. "That's the centre of power. That won't be too far from where the Black Mass will be held. Oh and perhaps you can provide me with a safe house that I can use as a centre of operations."

"Consider it done", said the General rising to his feet. "They haven't beaten us yet, son. We've got a lot of work to do."

General Peters was as good as his word. Within half a day I was installed in a small apartment in Central Washington. I was given a credit card and told to get whatever I needed. The fridge was well-stocked with food, so I spent several hours buying the clothes I thought I would need for the next stage of the mission.

I did all this with one eye firmly on the clock. At midnight on the 24th it would be the beginning of the full moon and Tripod could change back from spirit to corporeal form. After the loneliness of the tank I yearned to be with my soul-mate again.

I was aware of Tripod's spiritual presence all around me. We refrained from communicating, waiting instead for the pleasure of a proper re-union. Right on the stroke of midnight, Tripod manifested and came rushing across the apartment to greet me.

She could hardly contain herself. Head bobbing, tail wagging, she panted heavily as she jumped up at me. I rubbed her back and rolled on the floor with her. It was a whole lot more than just a reunion between a man and his dog.

As pleased as we were to see each other, there were serious matters to discuss. Tripod had been in constant contact with the Master, so she filled me in on the details of the continuing mission.

According to the Master, the crucial Black Mass would be held at midnight on the 31st at the Masonic Temple, a notorious location for Satanic activity. All the most powerful and influential Satanists would be there. The highpoint of the ceremony would occur as All Saints Day broke. At this time the leading adepts would change into the form of their lizard ancestors. Then, with the force of this Satanic 'blessing' behind them, they would activate their program with the nuclear weapon.

The Master had emphasized that the absolutely crucial point would occur as the adepts changed form. It was at this moment that I was to uncover the Seed. Caught between the two forms, this would be fatal to the high adepts.

We had only six days, so there was a lot of preparation to be done. Firstly, we had to find a way in to the Masonic Temple ceremony. No doubt security would be very tight on this of all nights. With many of the most powerful people on the planet in attendance, they wouldn't allow just anyone to enter. Further, the Satanic cabal must be aware now that there were contending forces against them. We could expect the location and the ceremony to be like an armed camp.

Then there was the problem of trying to locate the missing warhead. Tripod had backtracked from Task Force 121's Louisiana base umpteen times, trying to find where the actual warhead had gone. At every juncture she had been confronted by multiple identical containers going in different directions. It was all very confusing, just as it was intended to be. We shared this information with Peters and his team, but time was very short now. Days passed in a blur of frenzied activity. Inevitably, irresistibly, All Saints Eve drew closer and closer.

Subsequent investigations would reveal that the nuke had been placed in a family vault in the basement of the chapel that served Glenwood Cemetery. No doubt this was a deliberate strike against a symbol of Christianity by the Satanic entity that had conceived of the plan. Certainly the carefully tended graves of the cemetery exuded a bucolic charm hard to find in the great city of Houston. A more unlikely spot for Armageddon would have been difficult to find.

Just as the chapel bell chimed for 9am on a bright but chilly winter's morning, there was a blinding flash of light. For milli-seconds the temperature soared into the millions of degrees as every living thing within a half-mile radius was instantly vapourised. Hiroshima-like, all that remained of many were their shadows burned into stone or concrete.

As the piston of the hydrodynamic front pressed outwards it caused a massive shockwave. Blast winds raced in every direction reaching speeds of one thousand miles per hour. Like some demonic hot air balloon, an incandescent fireball rose into the air, while the heat and the force of the blast incinerated everything and leveled every building within a radius of one mile.

The ground-level blast had thrown hundreds of tons of dirt up into the atmosphere. As the familiar mushroom cloud formed it had as its backdrop an enormous dust cloud. Other detritus, acting like shrapnel, hurtled ever outwards causing immense damage to anything within a mile and a half radius.

In many ways the immediate victims were the lucky ones. There was worse in store for the accursed living. Everyone within ten square miles of the epicenter of the blast had been rendered blind by the flash, whether they had their eyes open or closed. Those trying to run found the tarmac melting beneath their feet. Some threw themselves into rivers or streams to try to put out their burning flesh, only to burst into flame again as they surfaced for air.

Initial estimates put the number killed by the blast at over twenty thousand, but there were four times that number wounded, and exposed to a fatal dose of radiation. Conservative estimates would put the final death toll at around one hundred thousand. But this was just the first stage of the Satanic plan. Next would come nuclear war.

The first I knew of the explosion was when General Peters turned up at the apartment. Formerly a vital and energetic man, he now looked grey and old. Briefly he railed against Cheney and his diabolical cabal. He related how he had struggled to merely delay a retaliatory strike. The military were no longer calling the shots. Neo-cons within the administration were completely in charge of policy now. There were plans afoot to strike not only Iran, but Russia and China too.

He asked me how the Master had got it so wrong. Why, he demanded, hadn't he foreseen the blast? I explained that I was as surprised as he was. I did add though that perhaps we should be more concerned with the outcome from the Black Mass that would be held later today. Clearly, that would be the Satanic 'blessing' to launch all out nuclear war. The cabal would go straight from the mass to their nuclear bunkers, where

they would wait out the results of the nuclear exchange. Then they would emerge to rule over a much reduced world population. This was their grand plan.

Peters was all for calling on loyal troop commanders to round up and arrest the plotters. I pointed out that, apart from Cheney Kissinger and Albright, we didn't know who the others were. Most importantly, we didn't know the head of the cabal. Further, who would believe Peters when he started talking about a Satanic plot? No, the superior strategy was to try to decapitate the cabal at the Black Mass, then to mop up the remnants.

Peters could see the logic in that, but, feeling that he had been misled by the Master once, he insisted on being more in control now. He wanted to be personally involved. I argued that only I could release the Seed of Light at the appropriate time. However, I could use his help to get into the Black Mass.

The Master was adamant that the ceremony would be held in The Masonic Temple, thirteen blocks south of the White House. This exquisitely designed building was the headquarters of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry. In fact there was to be a dinner in the main ballroom this very night. There was nothing particularly unusual about that. It was commonplace in freemasonry that the lower orders knew nothing about what the more senior orders were up to.

The actual ceremony was to be held in a vast underground chamber, accessible only from the basement of The Masonic Temple. The Master however knew of a secret passageway. To the rear of the building there was a parking area, gardening plots for local residents and an old garage used for storage. The passageway originated in this old garage.

I asked Peters for help in gaining access to it. He immediately sent some of his people over to check out the lock and make sure that I would have no problem in getting inside. There was a brief argument when he told me that his people had looked at the plans for the building and could find no secret passage. I argued that he had to have some faith in the Master. There were things he knew that no one else did.

There had definitely been a major change in Peters' attitude since the nuclear explosion. As far as he was concerned, I had lost a lot of credibility. He said that if I got it wrong again, tens of millions of people would die. For that reason I would be given until shortly after midnight to deploy the Seed. That would be the culmination of the ceremony. If I hadn't destroyed the top ranks of the Satanic priesthood by then, Peters would come in with his team and they would kill every living soul to make sure that they got the leaders.

I did try to explain that it was supremely important that ritual play a leading part. For all we knew, if the leading adepts were killed by normal means, perhaps they could reincarnate. Then we would be back to square one. This argument went right over Peters' head. Quite clearly he regarded much of the ritual of the Black Mass as being little more than nonsense. In his eyes this was just another secret society with its own arcane rules.

Another bone of contention was Tripod. Fortunately she had metamorphosed as a four legged dog in this particular incarnation, but Peters couldn't understand where she had come from, nor how we were so close in such a short period of time. I had already stretched his credibility to the maximum and I didn't fancy going through the long and bizarre explanation concerning Tripod's origins. I told him that the Master had said that the dog was very important for the ritual. He clearly didn't believe me, but seeing how adamant I was in taking Tripod with me, he accepted it with not particularly good grace.

However, at this stage I only had part of General Peters' attention. Martial law had been declared in Houston and the armed forces were on full alert, not only in the United

States, but all over the world. There were ongoing, top-level meetings at the White House, for which his presence was required. He delayed for as long as possible, but eventually had to leave at the express request of the President. He left five key members of his staff with me. Their remit was to get me to The Masonic Temple by ten in the evening. That should allow me plenty of time to get into position for the culmination of the Black Mass.

THE BLACK MASS

Precisely at ten we all left the apartment. A suitably sinister black box van was waiting for us in the street below. I made a last minute check that I had everything I would need. A powerful flashlight hung from my belt. The Seed was in its lead-lined box in a small bag slung around my neck. Also around my neck were night-vision binoculars, which the Master had said would be necessary to watch the ceremony in the dark, underground chamber. There was a small case containing tools which might be needed to gain access to the passageway. In my pocket I carried a powerful stun gun. In another pocket I had a printed copy of 'Il Principio' to read at the appropriate time. Clearly, the obstacles I could encounter were unlimited. Equally clearly, I could only carry so much stuff with me. Either the fates would be with me or they wouldn't. It was, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

A fifteen minute drive saw us in the parking lot to the rear of The Masonic Temple. The building itself was a blaze of light, but this run down area, largely obscured by trees and bushes, was hidden by shadow.

By comparison with the main building the stone-built garage was seriously dilapidated. One of Powell's team quickly unlocked the garage door and ushered Tripod and myself inside. "Good luck", he called as we disappeared into the gloomy interior, "and don't forget that, whatever happens, we're coming in at 12.15."

The way that he said it almost sounded like a threat and no doubt it was intended to do so. Peters' skepticism about all things 'Old Law' was obviously shared by his team. I got the impression that they were just humouring me and that theirs would be the serious work when 12.15 came.

It was all quite depressing and made me think about the worth of what I was about to attempt. I was basing all my faith on the Master. The latter's mistake regarding the Houston explosion had undermined his usual infallibility and had caused me to doubt, but then it occurred to me that this was all part of the test, the mission. Of course there would be things that caused me to doubt. The true test of my character would be for me to keep faith with the Master. Coming to a decision I swept all doubt from my mind and focused solely on the job in hand.

With the aid of the flashlight, I quickly found the fireplace which concealed the entrance to the passageway. The opening was blocked with plywood, but it was the work of seconds to smash this through with a hammer from the tool kit. Everything was overlaid with a thick coating of dust and I had to wait for several minutes for the air to clear.

Still using the hammer, I tapped the walls inside the fireplace. The right hand wall sounded suitably hollow and was, in fact, just plywood too. I smashed it through to reveal a dark passageway and steps leading down. The latter were running with water and covered with green slime. Walking was treacherous on such a surface, especially as the only illumination came from the flashlight. I edged into the passageway and began the descent of the slippery steps.

It was extremely claustrophobic. The passageway was narrow, the steps precipitously steep and the darkness closed around us like winter fog. Still we descended. I tried to judge how deep we were and regretted not counting the steps as we went. However, we were committed now and would have to follow wherever the passageway led.

After what seemed like an age, the steps came to an end and the passageway continued on a level plane. The air was now thick with must and I began to fear that we might have trouble breathing it. There was also a terrible smell of decay. Rat droppings lay thick on the floor and we passed many dead rats in various stages of decomposition. It

was a suitably infernal passageway that led to an infernal destination. Without ever making a sound of complaint, the ever-faithful Tripod followed in my footsteps.

Suddenly we heard a strange noise from up ahead. No doubt it was distorted by the confines of the passageway, but it sounded like a combination of growling, roaring and sharp intakes of breath. The further we progressed the louder it became. It most definitely wasn't a welcoming sound, but rather the sort of noise a beast might make. I reflected that if we had to have a violent confrontation with something, the narrow confines of a dark, subterranean passageway wasn't the ideal place. With the stun gun firmly held in my left hand, I gingerly inched forwards.

The roaring and growling was much closer now. Whatever sort of beast it was, it was certainly a large one. Rationality alone dictated that we should turn back and retreat, but that wasn't an option for us now.

Quite unexpectedly, the passageway came to an abrupt end and opened out into a circular chamber perhaps fifty feet in diameter. The vaulted ceiling rose twenty feet to terminate in a hole that disappeared upwards into blackness. I guessed that this was for ventilation. Apart from the rectangular doorway we were entering by, there were two other doorways, both on the opposite side of the chamber. There was a space of about twenty feet between them. Tethered exactly in the middle of this space was the beast.

It had fallen silent preparatory to our arrival, perhaps in order to surprise us. As it laid eyes on me though, it roared mightily and rushed towards us. It was sheer reflex to turn and run, although logic dictated that we could hardly outrun it in the passageway.

We hadn't run far when we realized that it wasn't following us. Very slowly, I inched back to the entrance to the chamber and peered inside. The beast was tethered to the far wall by a heavy chain that was about ten feet in length. The chain would only allow it to advance part-way towards the centre of the chamber. It would also allow it to reach either of the two opposing doorways. Puzzled, I studied the set-up more closely.

The beast was an absolute monster. Heavily armoured and with viciously curved teeth and talons, it resembled one of the lizard creatures that had attacked Eden. It was obviously possessed of a degree of intelligence too, for as I was studying it, so it was carefully studying me. One thing became immediately apparent. With the weapons I had with me, there was no way I was going to be able to kill this creature.

Yet there seemed to be no way to get past it either. Whichever doorway we chose to run towards, the beast could be there before us. It did occur to me that it couldn't guard both doorways simultaneously, but I failed to see that this gave us any strategic advantage. As I pondered the problem I became aware that Tripod had crept up beside me.

Suddenly Tripod ran into the middle of the chamber barking loudly. This incensed the beast and it ran to the extremity of its chain, roaring with rage. It wasn't particularly fast on its feet and Tripod ran in and out, nipping at its heels. This drove the beast into a frenzy. Frothing at the mouth now it flailed wildly at Tripod, intent on destroying her.

Tripod paused for a second and turned to look at me. A pictogram formed in my mind of Tripod running towards one doorway with the beast in pursuit, while I ran towards the other doorway. I understood immediately. "Nooooo.", I screamed as I realized the implications. Tripod gave me one last look then plunged headlong towards the right hand doorway.

Horrified, I froze. There was a piercing shriek as the beast closed on Tripod and grabbed her. The cry of pain resonated right through me, but it also served to galvanise me. My eyes running with tears, I threw myself towards the left hand doorway. The beast was too preoccupied with Tripod to care. As it tore her to pieces, I ran at full tilt along another passageway.

I collapsed quite involuntarily. It was a combination of shock and sheer grief. I was a man cursed by loneliness. Everything I had ever loved I had lost. I had emerged from nearly a quarter of a century of isolation in prison to find my soul mate, Janice, only to have her torn from me in the most brutal of circumstances. Tripod had filled a void and I had come to love her dearly. Now she had been torn away in equally brutal circumstances. How like that beautiful creature to sacrifice herself for me and the mission.

As I climbed to my feet I began to fill with a deadly resolve. My life meant nothing to me now and I had absolutely no fear of anything I might come upon at the Black Mass. Quite deliberately, I released 'The Beast' in me and felt it grow and strive to be free. Mightily empowered, I punished it and bent it to my will. There would be no gratuitous evil from me. But woe betide any lesser demon who might confront me this All Saints Eve. Quite dispassionately I would consign it to the pit from whence it came.

I pressed onwards and was relieved to see light up ahead. I could also hear a considerable hubbub of music and the voices of many people. I got down on my knees and crawled the last few yards to the end of the passageway. I peered out but could see nothing due to the fact that there were several large boulders in the way. I crawled among the boulders, taking care that I shouldn't be seen.

I was at the far end of a vast, underground cavern that must have been a natural phenomenon because rough outcrops of rocks hung from the walls and ceiling, with many loose boulders scattered around the margins. These and other rocky detritus were especially thick in the area where I was hiding. I guessed that this must be the farthest point away from the main entrance to the cavern. Certainly the vast majority of the activity was going on a good few hundred yards away.

At the opposite end of the cavern the ground sloped gently upwards and was clear of rocks. It was in this area that the most of the people were gathered. It was difficult to discern exactly how many due to the poor lighting. This came courtesy of two large bonfires and several braziers. The resultant illumination was patchy in the extreme. Some areas were brightly lit, but others were shrouded in shadow. Thus the celebrants seemed to appear and disappear as they moved about. This would aid me when it came time for me to move among them, but it did make scouting out the place very difficult.

Nevertheless, with careful observation using the night-vision binoculars, I did manage to see most things and by any standards it was a horrifying spectacle. Nothing was hidden, it was all done in the open. One didn't have to be a student of Black Magic to discern quite clearly that this was a Satanic gathering.

From two stalactites above where the ground sloped upwards hung an enormous white banner. Inscribed on it large, blood-red letters was the legend 'Do what thou wilt be the whole of the law'. I knew enough about Satanic lore to know that these were the words of Aleister Crowley, the notorious occultist. And directly below the banner these latter day followers of Crowley were fully endorsing his licentious creed.

Perhaps a thousand people stood close together in some kind of prayer meeting, but this was no Christian congregation. All wore long black cowls, much like those worn by monks. Hoods covered their heads and many wore various kinds of elaborate masks. As they chanted and danced about their robes swung open revealing that all were quite naked underneath. From a cursory observation I guessed that at least half were women.

The prayers were led by a cowed figure standing at a black altar set on the raised ground. His particular robe was distinguished by two large inverted crosses, at breast-height either side of the garment. In one hand he held a microphone and in the other an open bottle of wine.

The Mass was a parody of the Catholic Mass, with 'Satan' substituted for 'God' and 'evil' for 'good'. Much of it was recited backwards. The blasphemy was liberally interspersed with obscenity and from time to time the Satanic priest would scream out "Beelzebub, Beelzebub, all power to Beelzebub." At other times he would pour the wine onto the floor shouting, "Holy wine anyone, Holy wine", then he would snatch a hand-full of what must have been sacramental wafers from a plate on the altar and throw them into the flames of a nearby brazier.

This was all done to a background of incessant drumming. Six black men, completely naked, stood off to one side, rhythmically beating large drums. From their necks hung ram's horns, which they blew at irregular intervals, adding a thoroughly discordant note to the already bizarre proceedings.

In the spaces around the prayer meeting perhaps another thousand celebrants danced in and out of the shadows. Many were completely naked and copulated openly. Often there were men with men or women with women. Larger, mixed groups took part in frenzied orgies. Scores more stood about just watching.

On several tables covered by black cloths a buffet was laid out, but from the distance of my vantage point it was difficult to tell what was on offer. However, after several minutes of careful observation I did discern what could only have been a cooked, human leg and thigh, laid out on a long, silver platter. Close by were carving knives. The occasional passer-by would carve slices of meat from the thigh and place them on china plates.

On another table lay human skulls containing some kind of liquid. You could tell that they weren't purpose-made fakes, because they were very difficult to drink from. The liquid tended to pour out haphazardly, staining chins and garments alike. Then the participant would dip his or her finger into the spilled liquid and inscribe an inverted cross on the foreheads of their companions. I guessed that the liquid was human blood.

To most normal people the spectacle of this Black Mass would have been deeply disturbing, but it didn't touch me at all. I observed it all quite coldly and dispassionately. These were the people who were directly responsible for the death of Tripod. I would not rest until they had all paid in full.

As I began to formulate my strategy, I realized that all the key players were missing. I had seen no sign of Cheney, Kissinger or Albright. Neither had I glimpsed the presence of the High Adept who led this coven. If they should survive this night, then the Satanic cabal would carry on with their plans. There would still be nuclear war.

Carefully I scoured those areas that were obscured by shadow. I noticed that many of the celebrants who congregated here wore lavishly decorated cowls. Some wore sleeveless vestments embroidered with a naked, spread-eagled woman. Others wore brightly coloured garments depicting rampant goats, bears or pigs. I guessed that these were the more important members of the cabal.

There were others who wore plain cowls with no decoration whatsoever and their faces were covered by white masks. They seemed to be engaged in replenishing the buffet and other tasks such as collecting wood for the fires and braziers. I noticed that there was a store of wood among the boulders not far from where I lay. I could see the first part of my plan.

It was as I scanned the upper reaches of the sloping ground that I had a bit of good fortune. Previously this whole area had been in darkness. Yet this area above where the Satanic priest stood was the most elevated part of the cavern. Logic dictated that the most important people or the most important activities should be located here.

The priest had obviously come to the end of the group prayers. He placed the microphone and the wine bottle on the altar, before picking up an unlit torch. He

plunged the torch into the nearby brazier and waited a few seconds for it to catch alight. Then he proceeded to walk further up the sloping ground.

He stopped and I focused the binoculars more closely. There were three figures seated around a table. As the priest held the torch aloft I zoomed in on the group. All were wearing lavishly decorated robes, but with the hoods not covering their heads. Their faces stood out in clearly in the torch-light. I nearly shouted with satisfaction as I recognised Cheney, Kissinger and Albright.

Words were exchanged and I saw Cheney nod in agreement. He stood and took the torch from the priest. Turning, he walked further up the slope. My heart was beating so furiously I had to concentrate in order to steady my hands and the binoculars.

Cheney stopped before a large, golden throne. The figure seated upon it seemed quite frail by comparison, even though it was mostly obscured by a voluminous plain cowl. The hood was up, so the face was hidden. At times the light from the torch did flicker across it, but such was the distance that the binoculars were operating at the full extent of their capabilities now.

A few words were exchanged, then Cheney returned from whence he had come. He handed back the torch to the priest, then sat with the others. Suddenly the three of them were deep in conversation. I would have given anything to listen to what was being said.

However, from what I already knew of them I could be sure that it was certainly the stuff of evil. Cheney had established his reputation as Bush's evil twin. False flag terrorism and assassinations had been his stock in trade. For decades now Kissinger had stood condemned for his categorization of the world's poor as 'useless eaters'. And when Albright was asked about the fact that half a million Iraqi children had died without the US sanctions bringing down Saddam, she had replied that it had been a hard choice, but that the price was worth it!

What could you say about such people, except that they were utterly evil. They killed by the tens of thousands, yet still held high office. What could be clearer evidence that a Satanic cabal ran America?

It was now just half an hour before midnight and time for me to move. I crawled between the boulders and over to where the nearest stash of kindling wood lay. I didn't have long to wait. As one of the cowed figures bent down to collect an armful of wood I stunned him with the baton.

I dragged him away to a place behind a pile of boulders. There I took his cowl off and, stripping my own clothes off first, put it on, together with his white mask. But I couldn't afford for the wood collector to come round and raise the alarm. Quite dispassionately, I picked up a large rock and gave him several heavy blows to the head. Ruthless and cold blooded it might have been, but the fate of millions of people depended on the outcome of my mission. In those circumstances, the death of one Satanist counted for very little in the grand scheme of things.

Now was the time for boldness. Filling my arms with wood, I walked openly among the celebrants. I busied myself at a brazier not far from where a group orgy was taking place. Draped over chairs close by were several cowls, obviously dropped by those eager to join the orgy. It took just seconds for me to discard the plain black cowl I was wearing and substitute it for the finest of the other cowls. If status among the Satanists was marked by the finery of the garment, then that is what I should be wearing if I wanted to move freely everywhere. I reasoned that a missing cowl would hardly raise a hue and cry.

What did raise a hue and cry though was that the body had just been found. From time to time I had been looking back to where I had left it. Suddenly there was a crowd of

black cowled figures wearing white masks milling about and waving their arms in the air. A small crowd was beginning to gather. I hurried in the direction of the sloping ground where Cheney and the others sat.

It was now fifteen minutes to midnight and an important ceremony was about to start. The priest had the microphone in his hand again and was calling for the attention of the celebrants. People in outlying groups headed to join the growing throng at the point where the sloping ground began. Very soon almost two thousand celebrants were packed closely together. Whatever had gone before, quite clearly the serious business of the night was about to begin.

The priest initiated the chanting. His words were indistinct, but it sounded like Latin to me. As the Satanic congregation joined in, the combined force of two thousand voices swelled to fill the cavern. In the background the beat of the drums rose in intensity, the shrieks of the ram's horns cutting through the demonic cacophony.

I advanced as far up the slope as I could without attracting attention. There were no barriers or signs, but certain areas were clearly out of bounds. I had noticed that no one except the priest ever went beyond where he stood. Equally clearly, very few people even went as far as where he stood.

As I looked over the heads of the celebrants, I could see the black cowled figures in white masks trying to force their way through the crowd. I was reasonably sure that the ceremony wouldn't be stopped, but extra security might be enforced, so preventing me from getting close to Cheney and the other High Adepts. I would have to do something immediately.

Suddenly I saw six figures in extravagantly decorated cowls approaching the priest. Each carried a black bundle in their arms. Then I heard the priest calling for volunteers. Desperate to get closer to higher ground I rushed forwards.

As I reached the place where the priest stood, the six bundles had been placed on the altar before him. I raced to stand behind it, alongside several other volunteers. It was only then that I realized what was in the bundles.

Even though the noise of the chanting and drumming was deafening, I could hear the sound of babies crying coming from the bundles. As I peered closer I saw a new-born baby in each bundle. They were of different colours and races. I recognized European, African, Asian and Oriental. The remaining two could have been native Indian from the Americas. Quite clearly, they were meant to symbolize all the races of the world.

I had read enough about the Black Mass to know what came next. Human sacrifice was an integral part of all the most important ceremonies. The highpoint of this mass would be the sacrifice of these six infants. And I had just volunteered to kill one of them personally!

Those who wanted to raise the alarm were now at the front of the congregation, but they paused as they saw the sacrifice was about to take place. I was committed now. Should I refuse to kill the infant I would be instantly revealed as the intruder. I was aware that my five fellow volunteers had picked up their infants and were holding them by the throat.

It was one of those moments when time seemed to stand still. I was back in Eden, standing before the Master. Janice was on the screens and Tripod stood beside me. Everything I had ever done had brought me to this present juncture in the Black Mass. I, who had renounced evil, now stood on the threshold of committing a supremely evil act. Yet if I refused, millions would die. I picked up my infant and held it by the throat.

All at once I noticed that the priest had lost interest in the sacrifice and was staring up the slope. I followed his gaze. Cheney, Kissinger and Albright were on their feet, swaying rhythmically. This wasn't what held my attention though. Their heads were

fully exposed. Previously their faces had rarely reflected our shared humanity, but now they most definitely didn't. As I watched I saw them begin to change into the form of their reptilian ancestors.

Holding the baby loosely around the neck, I backed slowly up the slope. I peered beyond Cheney and his group to where the High Adept sat. Below me I heard shouts. As I turned my head, it seemed that every eye was upon me.

I turned back and advanced even further up the slope, but some of the celebrants were starting towards me. Desperately I peered in the direction of the High Adept. It too was on its feet now as it swayed with the others. The cowl had fallen back to reveal the face, which was also beginning to change.

Strangely, it turned its head to stare at me. I could have been mistaken. The face was already changing and there were multiple other distractions. In retrospect I went over the moment a thousand times, but always I came back to the same argument. Could you really mistake the face of a Queen?

The frantic crying of the baby broke the spell. Quickly tucking the infant under one arm, I took out the box containing the Seed with my free hand. In one fluid movement I opened the lid and tossed the Seed among the High Adepts. Instantly, terrible, unearthly screams filled the air as they writhed in agony and fell to the floor. Below me the whole congregation were on their knees, holding their heads between their hands and wailing, as blood poured from their every orifice. From my pocket I pulled out the printed sheet and began to read 'Il Principio'.

Suddenly there was a thunderous explosion, quickly followed by several more. Men in camouflage uniforms, carrying automatic weapons, burst into the chamber from both ends. They were firing quite indiscriminately. There was nowhere for the Satanic congregation to run to. I stood on the upper slope, infant in arms, watching as they died in droves. Then there was a blinding light, followed by paralyzing pain, and I knew no more.

JANICE

As I rose to consciousness I was aware of recent memories of transition, specifically the abysmal waters and the feeling of sinking. This time though I was familiar with my surroundings. I lay on the floor of a darkened 'Cave of Light'. I carefully ran through my recollection of recent events, which brought the pain of my grief over Tripod's death flooding back. I sat up quickly and looked around to check that she still wasn't with me.

"Are you well?" came the familiar voice of the Master.

"No, I'm far from well", I snapped in reply, the anger clear in my tone.

"I suppose you're mourning the loss of Tripod", rejoined the Master, "but before you wax too sad perhaps you ought to see what you have achieved. Look at the screens and know what has transpired since you left Earth-realm and the Black Mass."

Several screens, clustered together, lit up high in the ceiling to form one large screen. Almost immediately I saw the familiar image of The White House Oval Office. Behind the large desk sat Colin Peters in full military uniform, his chest covered with medals. Gone was the 'grey', 'defeated' look I had seen so recently in my apartment. This was the General Peters of old, confident and fully in control of the situation.

Looking directly into the camera, he began. "Ladies and gentlemen, citizens of the United States of America, it is my clear duty to address you tonight about the events of the last few days. But first I would like to introduce my colleagues, American patriots all, who will attest to what I am going to tell you."

Here the camera panned backwards to reveal four other men in full military regalia, sitting either side of General Peters. "To many of you they will need no introduction", continued Peters, "but for the record I will introduce them anyway. To my right sits General James T. Conway, Commander of the Marine Corps and to his right sits General George W Casey, Chief of Staff of the Army. On my left there is General Norton A Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the Air Force and to his left sits Admiral Gary Roughead, Chief of Staff of the Navy." As each man was introduced he nodded at the camera. All looked suitably stern, reflecting the seriousness of the moment.

"I, of course, am General Colin Peters, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Secretary of State." He paused before he went on.

"Few of you can be unaware of the events of the morning of the 31st October. I refer specifically to the nuclear explosion in Houston, Texas. Let me hasten to reassure you that we have the situation completely under control, although there has been severe loss of life. Let me also hasten to reassure you that this dastardly act did not occur as a result of outside or enemy action. That is, the United States is not and was not under attack from a foreign power." Again Peters paused to let his words sink in.

"Therefore it is my clear duty to inform you, the people of the United States, that there has been an attempted coup by fellow Americans. Some of you may recall that, just over two months ago, there was a nuclear weapons incident at Minot Air Base, North Dakota. Six nuclear weapons were flown, completely without authority, across country to Barksdale Air Base, Louisiana. Fortunately for us, loyal officers within the United States Air Force informed the appropriate authorities and this serious breach was uncovered. However, by the time action was taken, one of the nuclear weapons had gone missing and remained missing until that terrible morning of the 31st October."

Peters drank from a glass of water before he went on. "The intent of the plotters seems to have been to provoke all out nuclear war against those they intended to blame for the attack on Houston. I state very clearly that that will not happen now. Investigations are continuing and we have already rounded up several hundred of the conspirators.

Unfortunately, almost all hold high public office. A large percentage are members of both Houses of Congress and from both parties, so that arm of the Government is presently unable to function.” He turned to look at his military colleagues for support and they all nodded in agreement.

He returned his attention to the camera and continued forcefully. “Let me assure you that we are not a counter-coup. No one in the military wishes to run the Government. As I said earlier, the situation is under control. There is martial law in Central Houston, but the rest of the country is free to move about as people desire. However, as I also stated earlier, the Central Government is presently unable to function efficiently. For that reason it is intended that full elections will be held just as soon as we can arrange them and hopefully within two months. We jointly feel that it is not fit and proper for this great democracy to be ruled by the military for even this short period of time. For this reason we have asked an experienced and trusted politician, an American patriot and a God-fearing man to temporarily assume the position of President until the elections. Ladies and gentlemen, we throw our full support behind the long-serving Senator from Texas, Dr. Ron Paul.” The screen was suddenly filled with the likeness of Ron Paul and went into freeze mode.

“Momentous events, eh?” cut in the voice of the Master. “You are to be congratulated and my faith in you has been vindicated. You have successfully carried out your mission and the lives of many millions have been saved.”

“Yet I have suffered a great personal loss”, I interjected. “I’m afraid I can’t share your enthusiasm. Once again I have lost someone I loved dearly. And once again I am on my own with little desire to carry on. You know I came to this dimension solely to search for Janice, yet you misled me. You sent me on your missions, but I never found her.”

“But you did find her”, interrupted the Master abruptly. “As I have told you many times before, the fault lies within yourself. It is because you are so obsessed by the corporeal that you miss so much of the spiritual.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded. “How did I find her?”

“Why within the creature that you insisted on seeing as the dog, Tripod”, replied the Master.

There was nothing he could have said that would have shocked me more deeply. I stood rooted to the spot, mouth agape. “You mean that Tripod was the spirit of Janice?” I queried.

“Of course, of course”, came back the Master. “I could never understand how you never saw it for yourself.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” the anger was clear in my voice.

“For exactly the same reason that Tripod couldn’t tell you”, parried the Master. “We were both bound by the ‘Old Laws’. The same laws that you treat so cavalierly.”

Temporarily the rebuke gave me pause. For long seconds I was lost in thought as I examined the memories of my time with Tripod. Then a great sadness overwhelmed me. It was clear in my tone as I spoke. “Be that as it may, the facts are that I have lost Janice once more. Can you not send me on a mission where I might find her again?”

“But you have important work to do here”, chided the Master in a bantering tone.

“What work?” I asked dismissively.

“Well for a start you will have to look after the infant”, again the Master’s tone was light-hearted.

“What infant? What are you talking about?” I was puzzled now.

“Why the infant that came through with you when you departed the Black Mass so abruptly”, replied the Master. “The child lies within the cot that stands over against the wall.” As he spoke the illumination within the ‘Cave of Light’ increased.

Then I saw it. Just as the Master had said, over by the wall stood a white cot trimmed with frilly pink material. I walked over and looked inside. I couldn't swear to it, but it looked just like the infant I had held at the culmination of the Black Mass.

"We have determined that the child is well." I had never heard the Master sound so compassionate. "We have also determined that it is a girl", he paused, most definitely for effect. "We have decided to call her Janice", he concluded with finality.

I felt the beginnings of a smile tug at the corners of my mouth. As I picked the child up she awoke and stared deeply into my eyes. There was an instant bond. I reflected that I would enjoy watching little Janice grow up. For the first time in a very long while my future actually looked quite bright.

END