

The Metaphysik



Chanita

The
Metaphysik:
A Memoir

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Acknowledgment

People told me about *The Alchemist*, that it changed their lives. But, as a woman, I could never relate to the protagonist and the adventures he experienced. Though I could of course admire so much about the book.

I wanted to write a novel like it that could inspire me, and other women, in the same way I'd seen *The Alchemist* instigate a shift in the lives of male friends of mine. It was a catalyst, and guided the start of their transformation.

Book One

The Massacre

There were sixteen thousand of us – four thousand troops and twelve thousand civilians – when we set out on our retreat from Kabul four days ago. We've covered less than sixty miles of a total journey to Jalalabad of one hundred miles, and in that time our fighting force has been reduced to something less than a thousand men. I don't want to think of the number of women and children that we've been forced to leave behind, to be massacred by the bloodlusted heathen. The rabble of camp followers seems to ebb and flow with the flavor of the conflict. Of the Europeans, there are but a tenth of us still alive. The Afghan tribesmen seem to take particular delight in killing us.

We plan to reach Galdamuk tomorrow. If we can keep the Afghan's from slaughtering us all, we have then only twenty miles before we reach the safety of the fort at Jalalabad. I do not expect us to reach it but Pema, my assistant in all things, is optimistic. She tells me that, though many will die, we will not be among them. We, together, will survive.

Pema and I first met a year ago when the British Army was traveling through Peshawar, on its way into Afghanistan to claim possession of Kabul, her crown jewel. As the General's personal nurse – he is old and not well and needs considerable attention – I had need of an assistant, for both nursing and more general duties.

I originally approached her only to ask her for directions to the main hospital. There was something arresting about her appearance which drew my attention to her among the large, shifting throng that lined the street as we passed through the town. It was more than just the unusually short, close cropped raven black hair and striking blue eyes. When I mentioned my purpose she told me she was originally from Jalalabad – which we would

reach in a few days – and also knew Kabul well. That since her husband was dead, her children grown and independent, and the business her husband had left her had recently failed, she was interested in returning to the country of her birth. She speaks Urdu, as well as Pashto of course, which enables us to communicate without difficulty.

By this point in our conversation I'd noticed something else about her: the extraordinary expressiveness of her eyes. When angry they have a steely glint. But she's generally of a calm temperament – very little arouses emotion in her. But I could easily imagine her children when young quailing when she allowed her anger to flair. When excited they glitter, and seem to sparkle. And when, later, she talked of her lost boys – three of them killed in another pointless tribal blood feud – there are infinite depths of sadness in them.

Now, though she had no formal experience in nursing, she'd reared seven children on her own, after her husband's death, which happened when her oldest was only ten. She told me she was thirty five, and in some ways she looked her age. But life had not weighed her down – she is an adventuress by nature, I estimated. To run a small construction business of fifty tradesmen and laborers, alongside raising her family, I concluded she must be resourceful, and have strength of personality. On an instinct I offered her the position of assistant nurse. Without hesitation she accepted. I've never regretted my decision.

The caravan has stopped somewhere in the Tazin nullah. For once this will allow us to rest the night on higher ground than the Ghilzies tribesman, that have harassed us from the moment we left the cantonments at Kabul. We might even gain some sleep, without being so terrified of being overrun that it were impossible to close one's eyes.

Night is falling as the artillerymen set up the two cannon remaining us, and the other soldiers shore up defensive positions. The women, both European and native, are kept in relative safety in the centre of the plateau we hold, which is the size perhaps of a polo pitch. Still, at first it was very frightening, with bullets whizzing about us, until Pema pointed out that there was no possibility of our being hit as the enemy's position was far below ours. She has been my rock throughout this dreadful, terrifying ordeal; has already saved my life several times. Not least the last, dragging me to safety after I'd fallen on the road in the path of a Ghilzyes cavalryman. He had his sword raised, on the point no doubt of decapitating me, when she shouted warning to him that I was a woman. He immediately desisted: the Afghan fighter believes killing a woman brings bad luck. He even slowed and pulled me to my feet, before half throwing me at her.

The high regard I once held for the professionalism of our soldiery had already waned. To which stable most of the officers – but not all – were joined. But this evening they have sunk to a new low. The infantry are roaring drunk, having found the last of the liquor store. Rather than share it amongst all of us, which might have provided some heat and cheer as the night temperature falls, they've kept it for themselves. And are now making wild and implausible plans to ride down and attack our foe, who are camped in large number in a narrow defile just beyond the range of our guns. One of the Infantry Officers, a young upstart and the greatest fool, first vilified them as drunkards, and then haughtily threatened them with severe punishment on our reaching Jalalabad.

Fortunately Captain Stuart was there and praised them for fine brave fellows, which might earn them praise from the General, and medals from his Excellency. From cursing the stiff back of the retreating Captain Nicholl, they are soon joking, so much like children – of who would prove the most courageous, and who would win the most metal. Stuart persuades them

that, yes an attack might yet be necessary, and if so he will lead them. But the moment is not yet right, and they must not leave us women undefended, to be ravaged by the lust filled heathen. The men look us at sheepishly and rather quieten down thereafter, busying themselves with cleaning their weapons. Thank God for Captain Stuart. There are too few of his ilk left unfortunately.

It is dark now, the snow falling as it has done all day. All of us are dressed in the same clothes in which we left Kabul, and most are without cover. I am fortunate that Pema brought with us a poshteen of sheepskin, which we share. The wives of the NCO's, along with several hundred soldiers, are huddled around the tents of the General and the officers' wives. We are a sorry sight. I almost wished for something to do to take my mind off the freezing cold and the ever present threat of a barbarous death. But most of our medical supplies were early on captured by a raiding party. The little we had left is now exhausted. I also cannot help picturing the morning, to again waken to the sight of a graveyard of frozen corpses.

Dawn breaks and we are still alive. I wake to Pema's smiling face, pressing into my hand a half of a chapati. As I feared around the tent are small mounds, frozen bodies covered by the night's snow. But the worst news! As the Ghilzies made their inevitable night raid – on this occasion absconding with several officers' wives and their children – Stuart's night patrol came under attack from a large group of them. They fought them off the plateau, even rescuing some of the children, but in the process Stuart received a mortal wound – a sword thrust to the abdomen. I dressed it as best I could but, as he said, smiling ruefully, we were only putting off the inevitable. During the night he died.

Pema and I had our own battle to contend with last night. The next heathen gang to mount the plateau, which tried to kidnap us, got more than they'd bargained for. In close combat Pema stabbed several of them with an

evil looking curved blade. The remainder were seen off after I shot three of them with the revolver Stuart had left with me. Throughout the night, as before, there were many attempts to desert. No doubt some were successful, but we were woken regularly by volleys of shots and shouts to surrender.

We quit the hill reluctantly, leaving behind perhaps five hundred of the wounded and those maimed by frostbite, so disabled as to be unable to walk. However heartrending, they were necessarily abandoned to their awful fate at the hands of the first party of Ghilzyes tribesmen that would astride our redoubt.

I only heard after we'd set off that Akbar Khan had early this morning joined the General to negotiate for more hostages, in this case himself and all the surviving officers' wives. In so doing their lives are spared, while leaving the rest of us to a most certain fate. Now, among the Europeans remains only the wives of NCOs and myself. Several of them have taken to wearing native dress. As a precaution against the outcome of the final confrontation, which we expect tomorrow, Pema has gone so far as to dress me as a lowly Dalit. Given our filthy appearance and ragged clothes, it was with little difficulty that an authentic disguise was achieved. Of this I'm quite certain, as several officers with whom I'm acquainted walked straight past me without the slightest recognition.

Khan again tried to negotiate a safe passage for us if the men would only hand over our remaining firearms. At which of course negotiations broke down. The Ghilzyes tried to grab the weapons of the troops guarding the General. Shots were fired and the tribesmen were driven back off the hill.

And then further disaster! We've gone no more than a mile when the forward guard – or what was left of it – comes galloping back to inform us that the narrow pass, which we've by now entered, is completely blocked by

trees and thick wickets of thorned hedge. There's no possibility of clearing it as on both sides, and from ahead, a withering fire is trained on the position. But we have no choice but to advance into the firestorm for the enemy has just launched a ferocious assault on our rear. The camp followers, half crazed by lack of food and every moment expecting to be massacred, rushed forward, seeking protection from the advancing Afghans, who've mingled themselves among the slow moving riff raff. The soldiers are ordered to shoot and the attack is seen off, but at the expense of hundreds of Hindu natives killed.

We reach the obstruction, which completely fills the width of the road, and is two or more yards in height. Hundreds, officers and soldiers, lie piled together, naked and with heads hacked off. There are a few camp followers still alive, screaming, and out of their minds, throwing themselves repeatedly at the thick furz wall. The all pervasive smell of blood is sickening.

Another attack from the rear and we're forced into even greater confinement. Several platoons in the rear guard refused to fight, throwing down their weapons. We watch in horror as they're butchered to a man. The Ghilzyes advance is only halted by a line of officers hastily formed, who fire volley after volley into them until a wall of bodies is formed.

We have been without food or water for twenty four hours. All around us are the dead. And the dying who, as they grow weaker and nearer death, have a look of hopeless relief on their faces. I expect to soon join them, despite Pema's repeated assurances. I believe it was she that suggested to one of the officers to set fire to the timber obstruction. For half an hour we remain to enjoy warming our bodies, until it no longer provides protection from the enemy's frontal fire.

They also crowd the surrounding hills, and continue to fire down on us indiscriminately until we at last escape the steep sided valley. On emerging

from it, ahead of us is a relatively flat expanse of plain, which is covered in snow. Ahead some few miles is the old fort of Galdamuk. On reaching it, we find it has mostly been destroyed, by the Afghans mining the walls. After all we have suffered, it still looks a haven. Set on a low rise we have a long view over the gathered horde of tribesmen, their number extending as far back as the river, which forms an ox bow around the fort. Just the other side of it The Khan's brilliantly white tents are set up, to which at regular intervals newly arrived chieftains make entry.

Akbar Khan again comes to us to negotiate safe passage. Again promising we have only to hand over our weapons and we will be free to travel to Jalalabad, which is just now tantalizingly visible on the horizon. But several of the chiefs were talking in Persian, and their real intent was made clear. They are bitter in their hatred. Nothing would satisfy them except our complete extermination. No amount of money can save us. The Sidar exclaimed that his father, the King, still remains in British custody, and makes a show of pleading for our lives. But I am reminded of what Pema told me. That he has promised his father that the entire British Army in Afghanistan would be annihilated. "Only one soldier will be left, to tell their kaffir leaders what happened to them." One only has to look at the faces of the Ghilzyes to see their barely contained anticipation of cutting our throats, and wallowing in our blood.

At no stage did our illustrious leaders seem able to accurately judge the personality of their adversaries. The General was too quick to take Khan's – and others – assurances on face value. Even as he was led away as hostage, leaving the rest of us to a parlous fate, he seemed to genuinely believe that the officers and men would be treated fairly. I cannot believe – as some have since suggested – that it was nothing more than a convenient turning of a blind eye.

I can see in the faces of the soldiers and their officers that they know their fate. I too am certain. Pema has dreams of the future. Before we'd even set out from Kabul on our fateful march, she had the dream of the Sidar uttering his chilling promise of our annihilation. And then today it was confirmed. As we entered the plain and saw Galdamuk for the first time, I overheard the remaining senior officers repeat, word for word, Sidar's promise. They had heard several of the tribal chiefs repeating it with some glee. When she first told me her vision Pema also said that we would somehow survive the massacre, but would face being sold into slavery.

In the same conversation between the two officers, the more senior of the two said that he'd negotiated for all able bodied camp followers - among whom I mingle with Pema - to be led back to Tazin. And so, for now at least, we are safe. By now I am the least bit surprised that what Pema had predicted has come to pass. When she tells me what she's seen in a dream she's so certain about it, as if talking about something that has already occurred. But of all her wonderful attributes - and one I hope I learn from her, for I am prey to this fault - she is the least judgmental. And the most open minded. She tells me always that, however bad it looks, they were only doing their best. She is the freest spirit - whenever I dream of her, it's as a bird.

Soon after the negotiations are concluded we're led away. The remnants of the unconquerable English Army is pitiful: soldiers, a mixture of Sikh and European, and their officers, together numbering no more than three hundred. Against an Afghan force of several thousand cavalry and infantry. The last camel load of ammunition was wrested from us at the road obstruction. Apparently each man has only what he carries in his pouch, which amounts to no more than forty rounds each.

We're perhaps a mile back along the Kabul Road when there's a terrifying shriek. Turning, we see the Ghilzies and Akbar's troops fall upon

them. For ten minutes shots are exchanged and then, as they swarm over the ruins of the fort, jezails thrown aside, there's only the sound of the clash of metal on metal. I watch in horror as the sun glints off their swords, as they hack at the fallen. And everywhere one hears the cry of triumph as a decapitated head is held aloft.

I am in no doubt that without Pema I would have been one of the many thousands abandoned on the roadside. Leaving Galdamuk behind it feels that we have now departed the Valley of Death. And so, as we trudge along behind the Ghilzyes horsemen, though our future is as yet unknown, I am more optimistic than I have ever been since this nightmare began. As the sun is setting, after a long day's march, we arrive at the fort at Surkh Rod. My mood cannot even be punctured by the news from Akbar Khan, the tribal chief that won the right to us.

As his men pushed us roughly into a foul smelling cow shed, he laughed as he told us that no later than tomorrow or the day after, we will be at the slave market at Daruntah. And then added the ominous caveat that any of us not sold would be abandoned. A single woman alone in this god forsaken country: it is now easy for me to imagine a variety of outcomes, each worse than the last. But Pema has only to squeeze my hand, and smile reassuringly, for my confidence to return. She laughs, telling me this is good news! Since she's been to Daruntah many times and has several friends in the town.

That night, however, our own misfortune is set aside as something trivial. For we, the native women, are witness to a horror that I would never have believed a human being could commit against another. And this after all I've seen in the last days!

The Rape of England

Two days before the massacre at Galdamuk.

“We will never tire of Jihad. Martyrdom does not pain our hearts. We are victorious whether we die, whether we are at war.... It is never over, until the last one is gone from our land.... Amen.... Our land is all we have. Allah, destroy the Kaffir.... Amen.” Zulficar Khan is the leader of a tribe of more than five hundred from the Tangi Valley. He is in prayer with his fighting men, made up equally of cavalry and infantry, and totaling a hundred and fifty. At night they camp in the mountains overlooking the road between Kabul and Jalalabad. They've been involved in the attacks on the retreating English Army from the first day of their exodus from Kabul.

“.... Allah is unity.... I seek refuge in you. Against Evil.... Allah give victory to the holy warrior. Inshallah he will give us freedom.... He will slaughter the infidel.... Amen.” Dawn is breaking. The men are knelt around campfires making their morning prayer. After breakfast they will make their way along the ridge line to a point where the next attack on the retreating English army will begin.

During the meal a young fighter, barely more than a boy, finds himself next to Zulficar. He asks him, “Lord, when will victory come?”

“If the holy warrior fights only for the glory of Allah, then victory will be ours soon. We fight for our right to exist. And for our families to live in freedom and peace.”

“I do not understand why they invaded our country. They are not oppressed. I have heard that their land has never been attacked.”

“The Kaffir seeks to destroy us in order to take our land and all that Allah has given us. But with him at our side we will destroy them. We are his

holy messengers. History is on our side. They will always face the same destiny, whatever Kaffir army enters our holy land.”

The men are waiting; have been ready for an hour. Though the sun has risen above the mountain tops, and shines down on the Jalabad road which winds along the narrow valley, it is winter and snow covers the ground. “Hold! Let the first of them pass beyond those rocks....”

Shekor, still young but highly regarded for his bravery, is a reckless fighter. He seems to seek out death. He starts singing. His brother warriors have been waiting, for it warms their hearts to hear his voice carry over the mountain. Those within hearing start to laugh, and the laughter ripples along the line of men.

*I will not back down
I am victorious in every battle
And every day of war is a bright morning.*

Smiling, The Kahn pats the boy on the shoulder, “He is always like this. Even in the middle of battle you’ll hear him sing.”

*We have taken on the holy belt of war!
Our enemy is afraid!
Children, they drop their guns and run away!
We belong to Allah.... We fear no one
Mother! Give me your blessing and pray for our victory!*

As the song ends – the last line taken up by all the men – Zulficar Khan screams, “Now! Now! Attack the Kaffir! One by one – we kill the donkey cunts.... Shoot their brains out!”

This day the brigade assigned to protect the women offers the least resistance. When their Colonel falls all fight goes out of them. The Afghan Cavalry had made a desperate rush down the mountain and seem to fly into the rear of the 37th Infantry. They retreat before them in disarray, so rapidly

that the European women, that had started in the centre of the phalanx, are soon at the rear and caught up in the fighting.

The Colonel, abandoned by his troops, is badly cut up by the marauding Afghan cavalry. Wounded in both thighs by deep sword thrusts, as he falls from his horse one of them cuts off his leg below the knee. On the ground, he tries to rise but can only lift his body. He shoots several of the advancing fighters before one of them swings in and decapitates him with a powerful sweep of his sword.

There is no let up. The men are on the verge of fleeing in a rout. But several officers form a front and hold them to a line of defence of the women. The attack falters, but as if a single body, without receiving command they wheel around, regroup, all in less than five minutes, and then fly at the retreating army again.

The Afghan fighter is born to it. It is instinctive in him. A honed fighting machine. When out of battle he might be bored, pettily avaricious. But before an enemy – against any, however powerful – he is fearless and of a single mind. The eyes of an eagle, of medium height and build, they are of a wiry and surprising strength. And supremely skillful with sword, knives, and their ancient but long ranged and accurate jezzeils. In a fight he is cunning, and completely amoral. No tactic is beyond him, however barbaric. Without fear, he is at the peak of awareness. With Allah at their side, defending their own land, and never tiring – they love to fight, live for it – they are invincible.

In the second attack the remnants of the 37th Infantry retreat in disarray, and the Afghan cavalry is quickly among them. It is only then clear to the officers their true purpose, beyond killing the Kaffir. Kidnap and ransom is their stock in trade. Usually conducted between tribes, the English represent a novel opportunity, with considerably higher stakes.

Their cavalry force back the 37th, and then their own infantry – each carried on the back of a horse into battle – drop to the ground and

immediately begin a withering fire on the retreating English troops. In the chaos the riders have only to pluck, from the screaming mob, the pick of the European women and children. They then throw them over the neck of their horses before turning and galloping away. In this way twenty officers' wives, and an equal number of their children, are captured. With the fighting over for the day, those Tangi cavalry unable to capture a hostage immediately start the journey back to their home province. Thirty riders, with their infantryman, remain, and they march the Europeans overnight to a remote fort some ten kilometres off the Jalalabad road. From here, normally, negotiations would begin for their release against a suitable ransom. But these men are led by a ruthless psychopath. For a week, in the middle of which Leyah and the native women arrive, the European women and children are subjected to unspeakable sexual violence. It is the way most women everywhere, for all time, have experienced the Human Condition. The only difference in this case, perhaps, is the degree and calculation of the brutality they suffer.

When the nightmare is ended those hostages still alive are offered up for ransom to the Commandant of the fort at Jalalabad. When at last returned to safety, most of the women refuse to reveal what they'd endured. Only the wife of a sergeant of The Engineers would tell the Commanding Officer, "They were beasts, out of their minds, like rabid dogs. Long haired, clothes filthy, they stank.... No, I'm not brave! How am I telling you this without crying? Because I have run out of tears! Whatever else I see in this life, I will never shed another tear."

I know I am Evil. I dream of power, control. I must dominate. Completely. I hold the thread of life in my hand. They see it there.... There is nothing I can do to stop. Only live it, until I die in battle. If I don't free myself to my desires, they will crush me. I feel the power of my Evil.

The first night Zulficar Khan has a great feast awaiting his victorious fighters. In the main hall of the secret fort dozens of large silver trays are brought in and laid out on richly patterned carpets. Laden so high with meat and rice, and later fruits from the the nearby valley, it takes four women to carry each platter. The feast lasts into the early hours. The men drink no alcohol but there are more than sufficient drugs – hashish, mushroom, opium – that by the time he takes them down to the dungeon they are more animal than human. The fort was chosen for the dungeon, which is over two levels. Zulficar keeps the Europeans on the lowest; alongside one walls there's a continuously flowing stream. The Kahn reasons that with this, there is no need to provide them sustenance.

Tonight is our reward. Though already Allah has blessed us with the opportunity to kill the infidel in great number. More than I ever dreamed of. This is not tribal war, in which I might possess twenty or thirty of our enemy. There were twenty thousand of them! And they were defenceless. They thought they were better armed, with more modern weapons. But they didn't know how to use them. And our jezzails, well tested, are more accurate, more reliable, and have longer range. Yes, even their soldier was defenceless. It is Joy to see their faces at the moment they know they're going to die. All resistance leaves them. They submit to the greater power.

While the soldiers are still eating, the women and children are paraded down a narrow path through the middle of them. Howling, barking and growling as dogs, they fight to gain position to select the first of them – the woman or child which they will take, and use. Some sit together, joining forces so they can find entertainment in their playthings performing together. One group has only the youngest children, whom the other men

have no interest in. Any of the mothers that pleads too loud for her child has a cloth stuffed in her mouth, is bound hand and foot, and then forced to watch their abasement.

One of the first picked out is a heavily pregnant young woman, very blonde and with blue eyes. The Kahn punches her in the stomach and then throws the screaming woman over his shoulder. The men follow him outside to where a captured cannon has been set up opposite the main gate. He has her tied face down over the barrel, and then stripped naked from the waist down. All the men are required – after declaring allegiance to Allah and to The Kahn – to rape her anally. After an hour of assault she starts to bleed heavily and then miscarriages. A well formed baby drops into the dirt, which is then kicked around as a football until it falls apart. While the women were kept under guard in the hall, the children are forced to watch. One of them, a well set youth of fifteen, is severely beaten after he remonstrates for the woman to be let go. When he regains conscious he starts raving. Thrown down into the dungeon he continues to thrash about and has to be chained. For the remainder of the incarceration of the Europeans, whenever he wakes he mumbles or shouts incoherently, and seems to recognise no one.

With all the captives allocated their Owner, Zulficar Kahn is everywhere among his men, encouraging them to ever greater defilement. Where one hesitates, he throws them aside and assaults the victim himself.

I cannot kill enough. It is for my pleasure. Fuck Allah! But they will not know.... They are my gods. Their bones are an alter to their beauty. Here I will pray. Alone at the alter I will eat them, the dead. Their heart; their brain. If a boy I will eat his arm muscle: his power. I am their strength. Within me am I crowded with the souls of those that I've taken.

One woman is held under water while men line up to take turns to rape her. Though vomiting up water, multiple times she recovers. But as one of the men climaxes he holds her under for too long and she drowns. She lies limp over the barrel, her head still underwater, when The Kahn comes over. He curses the man for killing her: "You whore's bastard, only I may kill them!"

Zulficar throws the dead, naked woman over his shoulder and goes to his hut. In the centre of it is a large fire piled with rocks along its centre. Kahn throws the body onto the brightly glowing stones. After cooking her he cuts out her heart and eats it. He slices through the top of her skull with a razor sharp scimitar, and scoops out her bubbling brains. He has a servant douse the fire, and after he's left he positions her legs wide apart. For the next days he will regularly return to her, eating her flesh and raping her.

When I first saw her something told me it was her last day... I did not know I would be the instrument of her death.... But yes, YES! they are all under my control. I dominate their existence. I don't want them to go - if I kill them, then she is mine forever. That is why I do it. Alive or dead, I don't care. At the moment of their killing, I am a god. They are mine. Of course I cannot tell them. Except Omar perhaps. I've seen the look on his face when he defiles one: it's like looking in a mirror.

Allah! Allah! They go down on their knees and beg for their lives. I put myself in her mouth. Her eyes started as I came in her.

When two are required to perform one of the men will hold a knife to her neck. Forced to suck on her brother, and then he rape her. Each has a thin cut made in their arm; they must drink from their blood. The girl defecates in his mouth. They then cut each other - sliced all over their body until they're covered in blood.

These two children are among the survivors. Their bodies are left heavily scarred as if their skin were a patchwork. The Kahn particularly watched their defilement, sniggering and giggling whenever they pleaded to be let go.

The barbaric assault reignites whenever the urge comes over one of the men. Sleep, a light meal, and then a woman or child is selected, or several. Heavily drugged they continue to snarl like rabid dogs, biting and even gnawing their flesh as they rape them. Once satisfied they have the victim thrown back in the dungeon, before returning to their bed, and sleep, until the cycle renews. During one such session involving two women and several of the fighters, the two captives grab their knives and, in a suicide pact, slit each others throats. The Kahn allows one of his favorite lieutenants to cut off and consume their breasts. He reserves their heart and brain for himself.

There seems no limit to the imagination of Zulficar when it comes to humiliating and dehumanizing his hostages. On the first day he carefully selected five of the women, whom he reserves for his exclusive use. There was no obvious reason for the particular choice – they range in age and physical appearance, though tend to be among the more fuller figured. The first night he only rapes them. The second he kills two and rapes the other three. The third night he kills the last of them, rapes them, and begins consuming them.

At the end of the week most of the men set out for their homeland. Several of the European women choose to go with them. With only a small guard remaining, The Kahn negotiates with the English General in the fort in Jalalabad for ransom of the remaining women and children. After their departure the inhabitants of the fort find in The Kahn's personal quarters something resembling a shrine. It's made up of the bones of his victims,

along with some of their hair and undergarments, which still carry a faint scent of their bodies.

The following year, after recapture of Afghanistan by English troops, several officers lead raiding parties to the Tangi valley region. All but one of the captured European women refuse to go back to their husband, preferring to stay with their Afghan lover. Some have converted to Islam.

An additional note. With regard to the evil and depraved thoughts of the Zulficar Kahn, which I have recorded heretofore, I will only say this: I know because Pema told me.

Confusion

Of course the native women, except those still virgin, were also raped, by the single men stationed at the fort, and by their Ghilzyes guards. The party only comes to an end with the departure of the Tangi tribesmen with the European women. The slave market in Daruntah is in four days time and the women must be there one or two days beforehand so they can be prepared for sale.

It's a two day forced march to Daruntah and there are still many bands of tribesmen roaming the countryside around Jalalabad that missed out on the spoils of kidnap and ransom. The value of the native women has increased considerably in the week since the massacre at Galdamuk; have become a prize worth defending. The leader of the Ghilzyes tribesmen that hold them is taking no chances, and it's decided to transport them under cover of darkness.

They tell us nothing except that we would be marching through the night, keeping to lesser used mountain trails. Despite Pema's assurances, I immediately picture a similar fate to that of many of my countrymen: a frozen death, left abandoned in the mountains. But in fact the guards – the same ones that have brutalized us for the last week at Surkh Rod fort – appear suddenly very concerned for our welfare. I'm in no doubt why. We're provided with warm clothing and thick leather coats and boots. So, despite the freezing conditions, the march is nothing like what we went through on our retreat from Kabul. On the steeper tracks they even allow us to grab the tails of the horses. The only difficulty – quite significant in the dark, walking narrow tracks – is that the women are all joined together by thick rope tied around our waist and necks.

That first leg of the march we keep just below the ridge line of a high mountain range. The view at times, in the still, clear night, is breathtaking in its enormity, and stark emptiness. But I cannot enjoy it. As dawn breaks we stop in front of a deep cave almost at the mountain's peak. Once inside fires are lit, and we're well fed. Most of the other captives, exhausted by the rigor of our march, fall almost immediately into a deep slumber. But I can only think of our bleak and desperate fate: slaves to some heathen tribal leader. And what if they discover my secret? But Pema keeps me sane – I hear several women talking of killing themselves rather than allow themselves to become slaves – by repeatedly reassuring me that we would be safely in Jalalabad before the New Year. I dare not ask her how she plans to free us.

Woken by Pema in the early afternoon, after a long night of fitful sleep, she points down to a wide valley, along which a river meanders. A town – our destination, Daruntah, she informs me – is spread along both its banks. The whole valley – an oasis of green – is an orchard of many different fruit and vegetable. To the south, in a shimmering haze, I convince myself that I can see Jalalabad. Pema only smiles when I tell her this. At one point in the afternoon, as we're preparing to leave, the guards herd us to the very back of the cave, and place the horses in front of us. Soon after there's a loud clattering of hooves. The riders stop only briefly when the leader of the Ghilzyes engages with them. Soon they're on their way again. They must have been a hundred of them; they took an age to pass and I could still hear the sound of their horses half an hour later.

Several hours later, the sun having by now set, and having once again been well fed, we set off along another narrow trail cut into the steep hillside. My mind is now filled with imagery of what might happen to us if we're unable to escape. My greatest fear is of being separated from Pema. In the near pitch darkness there's no distraction from my thoughts: head down, I follow in Pema's footsteps along the stony track. Some time in the early

hours we reach the junction with a track that winds down to the fertile valley in which the town of Daruntah nestles. Still on the ridge line, we look down on the sleeping town. One of the guards points to a dimly lit square alongside the river and, laughing, tells us that that the slave auction will take place there.

The main trail, along which we've been marching through the night, is at this point no more than a few feet wide. On the valley side it drops away into the darkness. Apart from the murmured conversations of our guards there's absolute silence. Without warning the woman immediately in front of Pema gives a loud shriek and throws herself off the cliff. The half dozen women in front of her are all pulled off with her. Fortunately Pema had her back pressed to the almost vertical rockface and is only dragged a little forward before the weight of the rest of us holds her. If not we would certainly have all gone over the edge.

Two of the guards throw themselves on top of us. One somehow miscalculated and cannot stop himself from tumbling over the edge. He makes no sound as he goes over, falling to a certain death. The other has his knife already drawn and slashes through the ropes binding us together. I expected to hear screams as the women taken over the edge also fell to their deaths. But in fact several start calling for help. That the ropes are caught among the bushes and stunted trees. As the Suicide tries to untangle them – she seems determined still to kill herself – they plead for the guards to cut them free from her. The path is so narrow that only a few of them can get around us to attempt their rescue. In their urgency, shouting at one another, and the women screaming, the men seem disorganized and unsure what to do.

I'm suddenly aware of being free. I don't know how she did it – had she pushed the one that went over the cliff? – but Pema has a knife in her hand. It glitters in the moonlight, and one of the men sees it. He tries to grab it from

her, but she slashes through her own ropes and then thrusts it into his chest. Blood gushes from his mouth. In the dark, chaos everywhere, no one notices: the guards attention is only on rescuing their prize slaves. Pema grabs my hand and we start running. Someone cries out warning and a shot rings out, but it only ricochets off the rock above our heads. Fortunately the track just ahead makes a sharp turn around a large boulder and we get past it before more shots are fired.

To my surprise, beyond it the high side of the track flattens off appreciably. Pema starts running up it, fleet as a mountain goat. Fifty yards ahead of me she seems to vanish into thin air. I run up to where I last saw her and she grabs me by the arm and pulls me through the narrow mouth of a cave. She then drags a flat rock over the small opening.

In silence we wait. Once, three men run past the cave, but must have only gone a hundred yards before turning back. Perhaps an hour later we hear the convoy leave. They have no time to waste searching for us: the slave market starts tomorrow and if they don't get them into town today they will not be able to rest the women. I want to escape the area, but Pema insists we wait through the day, until night starts to fall. I'm about to leave the cave when Pema pulls me roughly back inside. She points down the hillside. A half dozen fighters, in silhouette, have just emerged from a cave, trailing their horses. They had been waiting for us. A few minutes later they ride off in the direction of the town, on the same path the others had taken this morning.

Pema leads us down onto a lower track which takes us to the south of the town. Some time in the night we arrive at a large farm located on a flat plain. It's shrouded in darkness and utterly silent. But Pema has only to call out softly and lights come on. We're soon surrounded by an old farmer, his younger wife, and several teenage children. They seem old friends of Pema's and we're warmly welcomed. The mother bustles us into the house, which

has an upstairs where there's several bedrooms. We're shown to one which has a large mattress on the floor. The last thing I remember is sinking down onto it. Some time in the night I'm briefly awoken by a noise and find Pema not there. But I soon fall asleep again and when I awake in the morning she's lying beside me, snoring faintly. I wait until she wakes, and then go downstairs together. The lady of the house has prepared a wonderful breakfast for us, of breads, fruits and goat cheeses.

While we're eating I hear repeated mention of Zulficar Kahn. Curious, I ask Pema what they're talking about. It turns out one of the children speaks passable Hindi and she interjects to answer me. Laughing, she tells me that during the night The Kahn was killed by a strange dog that no one has ever seen before. Reportedly it was large, more the size of a panther. Its coat was jet black except for a broad stripe of white fur along its hackle line. Its eyes, like the Husky dog, were a pale piercing blue. The women of the town are rejoicing at the news. The Kahn is infamous for secretly abducting young women from this and other nearby towns. Rumor has it that there's a cave high in the mountains where he spends days alone. Where he commits bestial acts upon them before killing and eating them. He then makes a shrine of their bones. No one is mourning his death.

It seems that only I notice, but I keep looking at her and eventually Pema turns and smiles at me. A chill runs down my back. For a moment – it's no more than a feeling – she appears more canine than human. Something about her expression? In the way she sits; coiled energy, ready to leap? Or is it that she too has raven black hair with a streak of white shot through it along her centre parting. She has the palest eyes, that seem at times to look through one. Or is it nothing more than an over fertile imagination, simply because she was not in bed at the time Kahn was reportedly attacked? With Pema all these explanations seem plausible.

That afternoon, out of the large barn by the side of the house, the old farmer drives a solid looking cart pulled by two powerful buffalo, their coats shining in the sunlight. The cart is laden with fruit and vegetables. Pema, who's shaved her head and changed into clothes borrowed from the farmer, tells me that next morning we leave for Jalalabad. She is a farmer, taking his produce to market; I am his daughter.

The road from Daruntah is a good one: the town after all is the gateway to a fertile plain that stretches thirty miles along the banks of the Alishing river. After bidding farewell to our hosts we're soon on our way and making good time. Leaving early, the sun still rising, we join a large convoy of carts making the short journey to the fort, where the English are reported to pay three or four times the normal price for goods. The journey is very pleasant. The sun is out but the whole time a cool, brisk breeze is in our faces. The company is boisterous, in anticipation of returning home tonight or the next day with full pockets. We reach the gates to the fort at Jalalabad, without incident, in the early evening.

I wish I could say that our arrival at the English fort signals the end of our ordeal. But the native soldiers treat us little better than the heathen Afghans. Several clamor around Pema offering money to have me. When she refuses they grab us and drag us into the guard house. Here two hold Pema down, while the other, their leader it seems, starts to assault me. He has my shirt ripped open, exposing my breasts, when an English soldier swaggers in. I sense that he already knew we were there. He shouts at the native soldier, at the same time grabbing him by the collar, and throws him out of the guard house.

For a moment the man stares at me, surprised no doubt by the whiteness of my skin beneath my clothes. But then, to my horror, he casually shrugs his shoulders and starts to unbutton his trousers. I shout at him, at first in Urdu since I'd become so used to using it. Even when, in

English, I yell at him to stop, at first he takes no notice; seems not to hear. But then I see it dawn on him. By now he's already penetrated me. He blanches in the realization at what he's done, and pushes me roughly away from him with a cry of alarm. He starts to stammer an apology, but then his expression darkens. I think it had crossed his mind that if he's found out he would most likely be shot. It's dark outside, and there's no one about. His eyes fix on a bayonet lying on a nearby table.

Fortunately, before thought can turn to action an officer enters the guard room, no doubt alerted by the commotion, since both Pema and I are screaming loudly. Further good fortune, I'd met him several times in Kabul. And though he takes some convincing he's eventually persuaded that I am indeed the late General's personal nurse.

Of course after that things move very quickly. I don't know what happened to the soldier, and no one ever asked me about the attack. Before I can catch my breath the Commandant has contacted Delhi and he then informs me that I'm to be presented to His Excellency, and thereafter would receive a VIP escort back to England. I tell them nothing of the plans that have begun to form in my mind. I share them only with Pema.

It's becoming difficult for she and I to communicate. They do not understand our relationship and have sent Pema to the native quarters where, with assumed generosity, they offer her menial jobs. Of course I could do little more. I received permission, from the senior ladies, to invite her to be my maid. I never expected her to accept; I was in fact glad when she rejected my offer, though I was sad to see that she was hurt by it. I didn't realise then – she told me later – that she'd only felt sorry for me, having had a premonition of what was to become of me. During one of the few opportunities we have to spend time together she tells me that she has plans to open a small clinic and school somewhere, though she's unsure where. She invites me to join her in running it. The thought of working

together appeals to me, but already I'm thinking on a bigger scale of purpose. Perhaps once I'm established I can persuade her to join me in MY venture!

A few days later I leave her behind. To great fanfare, and under a large escort, accompanied by a group of ladies, we're transported by camel from Jalalabad to Peshawar. Of course we pass through the famous Khyber Pass; unlike on the up country journey, on this occasion our passage is without incident. A smaller number of them are my companions on the Khyber Mail to Lahore, and then on to Delhi, where I'm to be presented to His Excellency the Governor. Of course before I would have been excited by such an opportunity. But all the time the ladies are chattering away about the parties, who they're going to meet, the new dresses they're going to buy, my thoughts are filled with recollections of what Pema and I talked about on the journey from Daruntah to Jalalabad. When time – after we'd been running for our lives for so long – seemed to slow almost to a standstill.

We'd been travelling for an hour and had by now drifted towards the back of the caravan, as the other farmers pushed on, keen to reach our destination and begin their lucrative trade with the ferangi. Of course, we could not allow ourselves to completely fall off the convoy. There is always the possibility when alone of being picked off by a marauding band of tribesmen, for the possibility of ransom, or for nothing more than their entertainment.

Pema began talking on a topic of which I'd never before heard. "I want to tell you about the metaphysical world." At first she was very hesitant, which I'd never seen in her before. "I'm not sure how you'll take it. I don't want to frighten you." I laughed outright and told her, "After all we've been through? What could possibly frighten me?" My response only seemed to heighten her uncertainty. "Yes, I was afraid of that. Perhaps another time would be better."

This irritated me considerably, "What other time? If I've learned anything, it's that we shouldn't assume we're going to wake up tomorrow." Pema laughed, seemingly placated, "Yes, of course you're right. And we have plenty of time, we still have far to travel before we reach Jalalabad. Enough time to answer your questions about it."

"Tell me, please. I'm intrigued."

"The black dog...."

"That WAS you, wasn't it?"

Pema looked uncertain, "I don't know. I had a dream of being a dog and killing Zuficar Khan exactly as it happened. Leaping off a boulder and ripping his throat out. I remember his screams. And the smell of his blood. The heat of it as it sprayed from his neck over my face. It was so real."

"I've never told anyone, but I woke up in the middle of the night and you weren't there."

Leyah was captured by the complete novelty of this world that Pema was describing to her. Almost like being there during the performance of a miracle. She asked her excitedly how it could happen. From hesitation and uncertainty, Pema became very matter of fact and pragmatic, "Well, there's no doubt then, I must have done it. I've had similar experiences – never killing anyone, but traveling between the metaphysical and the physical worlds...." Leyah looked blankly at Pema, "You've never heard of the OTHER world, have you? Why would you, coming from your culture.... It's one that exists in parallel, if you like, to this one. We can easily enter it, anywhere and at any time. I'd planned to take you on a trip when we get to Jalalabad. But I wonder now if we'll have time."

"But why should I go into it? What's there? Or is that the wrong question?"

"In it you'll meet Power Animals, and Helpers in lots of different forms. It's an inhabited world, just like this one but with an infinite variety of species in it."

"It sounds like dreams."

"At first people think that's all it is. But we can travel between the two worlds – to the other side of the universe in an instant if you have the need to be there. And whatever you learn there is just as meaningful as here."

Leyah was becoming skeptical, "Our imagination then?" Her gaze started to wander over the scenery, breathtaking in its lush greenery.

"How then did I know that you were thinking this morning about your lover, with one arm? Richard? Telepathy is part...." Pema couldn't help laughing at the bemused expression on Leyah's face, "That's really possible? To know what someone's thinking.... Even if they're not here."

"It's all possible. And you know that I have the gift of seeing Dream Futures. My own, or anyone's." Leyah asked hesitantly, "Have you seen mine? ... Is Richard in it?" Pema stared at Leyah for a moment, then shook her head. "There is a man, though. You meet him unexpectedly, in Delhi. But after that the dream is black. I didn't see anything else."

"Is there any reason for me to visit this meta world?" Leyah was again captured by its novelty, and had begun to romanticize it in her mind. "You should seek out your Power Animal. It can help you find your purpose in life. Which will become significant for you quite soon. But you can ask them any question, in fact. It can be something practical or spiritual. Think of them as a wise old person who's experienced much of the world."

"What more is there for me to see that I haven't already in these last few weeks? And anyway...." Leyah became despondent, "What do I have to go back to?"

Pema nodded, "This is what I'm talking about. Your future. You may allow yourself to be limited by the conventions expected of an English

woman." Unexpectedly, Leyah responded angrily. She didn't even know why herself, "There's nothing wrong with them, under the circumstances. I'm sure some of them appear silly to an Outsider, but they got us as a civilisation to where we are today.... We rule the world still, don't we?"

Pema smiled easily, "Your MEN rule the world. Memsahibs are more constrained than native women in what they can do...." Leyah's eyes flashed. She felt enraged, still without knowing why. But then, as Pema took her arm, and she felt the heat of her – something in the physical touch – it dawned on her. "I knew it, but I couldn't admit it to myself, could I? Because there's nothing I can do about it, is there? I can either go back to England or marry someone here. Either way, it doesn't really matter, my life will be the same. Meaningless."

Pema shook her head, taking Leyah's hand in hers, "It won't be easy, but you DO have choices. You CAN find a point to life. You have much to offer. Let me tell you what I think we can do...."

Raj

On arrival in Delhi one cannot help being impressed by the pomp, the casual displays of absolute power, and the seemingly unlimited wealth. A native band, in bright red jackets, is playing as we pull into the railway station – *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*, and other tunes in similar rousing vein. And then the short drive to Government House in opulent carriages, the calf leather so soft I want to rub my face against it. On arriving we're escorted through to the back of the main buildings to where a Garden Party is being held in honor of the few European survivors of the massacre in Afghanistan. Over the weeks since my return to civilisation, several more survivors of the massacre had appeared at the gates of the fort at Jalalabad, all of them more dead than alive, and each with stories of survival just as fantastic as my own.

Like performing seals we're required, again and again, to repeat them to the guests of The Honorable Company. It occurs to me, at some point in the middle of the afternoon when the regular cliques have formed, that this glittering world seems less real to me than the one Pema introduced me to on our sojourn from Daruntah. But at last it's over, by which time I'm exhausted by the front I'd been forced to maintain. But I have one duty to perform before I leave for Shimla, which I cannot shirk.

It proves surprisingly easy, disturbing even. I talk to one of the Governor's aides about my request, which immediately draws the attention of several others. Within minutes I'm surrounded by half a dozen of them, all vying to be the one to convey my petition to His Excellency. Several looked crestfallen when I select a young lieutenant from the Medical Corps, to ask the Governor for funding for the small clinic and school that Pema wants to set up.

Within an hour it's all arranged: "She has the pick of the slums," he says, with a light laugh. "Tell her to come see me and we will start work on it immediately. It will be a memorial. The Governor insists that we have them. The world must see that we do not forget our fallen. They will be remembered. And revered. Defeat in battle is nothing to us: we will overcome...." There is more in that vein but I've found that as soon as I hear them talking in this manner, it's almost as if I fall deaf.

I send a brief telegram to Pema with the good news. The outcome suggests to me several possibilities that I hadn't previously contemplated, that are certainly more attractive than returning to dull old England. But first to Shimla! I can only hope it dispels the sense of life's pettiness, the smallness of the world which had, a month ago, seemed vast, exciting and full of limitless possibilities.

On the train, of course I begin to think more of Richard, whose love sustained me through many of the worst hardships we faced. Without him and Pema I might easily have given up, but it never once entered my head to do so. Richard was a patient of mine at the hospital at Shimla. He was recovering from injuries sustained in a vicious ambush by the awful Thuggees. He'd lost an arm in the skirmish but, young and healthy, he was soon on his way to recovery. I fell in love with a romantic image of him, but it was one that he was still able to live up to as I was leaving for Kabul. I wondered though whether, like everything else, I would now see him differently.

As the train clack, clacks across the dry plains, my thoughts turn to my old life up in the cool mountains. How it seems another world away! In the empty carriage, I laugh out loud, recalling the endless parties, when I was the centre of their attention. I know it was only because I was new and, by some years, the youngest. I imagine most of the single women will now be gone back to England, their last chance of marriage having eluded them. You

could see their desperation, though how hard they tried to conceal it. I was fortunate, I suppose, because I had my work; they could only offer themselves, as wives. They tried to be nice to me: playing the game fair. Even at the parties, while the boys vied, in a very gentlemanly way, to have the first dance with me. How much fun we had, flirting with them; going for endless rides in the mountains in the cool morning air; hunting; the games. It seemed as if it could never end.

After chugging up the steep hillside, around and around each bend until I'm quite giddy, at last we pull into the station. Richard is there on the platform waiting for me. Shrouded in the early morning mountain mist, and not a little steam from the train, it isn't hard to reignite the romanticism of those times. My heart skips several beats when I see his smiling face, and he waving casually to me when he first sees me. But I'm afraid it was only that, an illusion, and it was quickly shattered.

In the jostle to collect Leyah's luggage one of the porters drops a suitcase. Richard explodes, hitting him across the back with his swagger stick as the man bends to pick it up. He only flinches, and apologizes to Leyah. "What good is that, boy? When you've broken everything?" Richard speaks good Hindi, and curses him, not knowing that Leyah understands it all. He raises the stick again, but then catches her eye and his arm drops. He turns to the head porter, who'd scurried over on hearing the commotion. "Don't let me see this oaf here again, wallah! He can't be trusted with the simplest task."

The porters and all the other workers at the station maintain an obsequious manner around their white masters. Before Leyah would have unconsciously accepted it as the norm of behavior, but this time she's very aware. Is reminded of the last day of the march, when the native soldiers were now certain of the English Army's defeat. Those still armed ignored all

orders their officers gave. Throughout the day hundreds of them deserted, openly defiant, some cursing, others laughing in the faces of the officers as they absconded. They knew by then that no one would waste their few remaining bullets on shooting deserters.

She feels uncomfortable, and the feeling doesn't leave her the whole time she's in Shimla. The sense of unreality; at every turn the layers upon layers of dissimulation. Not only the feigned deference shown by the natives, but the artificiality of the life of the Europeans. Their complacent assurance – when Leyah had seen for her own eyes that it all rested on a wafer thin assumption of power and entitlement. She begins to see life in Shimla as something outdated; oddly stuck, while in a swirl of changing times.

On the short carriage ride from the railway station their conversation is stilted, and they have difficulty finding any grounds of common understanding. Leyah recognises that it's only her perspectives that have changed, and she sympathizes with Richard. Looking out the window she finds the town has lost all the attractions she'd anticipated of it. Where once it had seemed a little wild, on the edge of civilisation, it now seems small and grey. A provincial backwater where nothing of any consequence is ever likely to happen.

That night there's a party in Leyah's honor. She finds the gaiety forced. And Richard increasingly morose and critical. Looking around her she wonders how she never saw it for what it is – another remote and forlorn outpost of Empire. In the safest of billets, the officers are boys playing at being men. And the young women, preening themselves for the men's attention, appear just as tattered as the bunting and other decorations around the walls. Two recent arrivals from England, the centre of attention before Leyah's visit, are piqued, and make several whispered asides that find their way back to her, raising questions of her purity. To Leyah's face one asks, "We heard all the women were abused. It must have been terrible for

you.” Leyah bites her tongue, aware that any scene would only serve their purpose. Gossip in this small world travels faster than the wind, and if there’s real scandal, it can be blown down all the way to Delhi. She saw it for what it was: nothing more than the ruse of desperate women to see off a perceived rival. As she looks again around the ballroom, Leyah laughs to herself. *They’re welcome to them – all of them. There’s no one here for her. And there never would be.*

It’s unfortunate perhaps that at this moment Richard chooses to make several fatuous and ill informed comments about the retreat from Kabul. What could, and should, have been done to save the day. He makes it sound like a schoolboy rugby match. Though even Leyah had come to recognise the incompetence of many of the officers, not one, even in the face of certain death, showed anything but unwavering courage. They honored themselves and their brothers in arms. How many had she seen dying to protect the regimental flag, with no thought for themselves? Again Leyah avoids being drawn into pointless argument. She excuses herself, telling Richard she has a fever coming on. She insists he remain at the party. He only stares at her, but she can see the disappointment in her eyes.

The next day, waiting on the platform for the Mail train, Leyah maintains a polite, if somewhat frosty, front. She apologizes to Richard, telling him that urgent matters concerning her proposal to the Ministry of Health necessitate her immediate return to Delhi. Richard is not equal to keeping the mask in place. “I heard the rumor, but I couldn’t believe it could be true of you. What are you possibly thinking, setting up native hospitals? They have their own methods for all that. We don’t interfere: I thought you knew that.”

Leyah maintains a calm exterior, though she’s burning inside, “Yes they do, but they’re terribly outdated, and will always trail far behind the latest medical advances. The mortality rates in native run hospitals is appalling. Especially in the maternity wards.” Richard scoffs, “Aren’t there enough of

the little buggers as it is? I thought the system worked effectively enough; a balance. They breed like rabbits after all."

Leyah is not shocked by his reaction; she'd half expected it. There seems little point in responding directly, "Well, at least it will be an interesting challenge for me, to get it off the ground. The first one will be in the slums of Delhi, where god knows they need one. Ten even. So I'll be living there for some time. Perhaps I'll see you there?"

Richard's expression blackens, "What possible reason could I have? We were due to get married this year, which you seem to have forgotten. Your duty is to making a home for us, building a family." Leyah makes to speak but he dismisses her with a wave of his hand. His voice bitter, he tells her, "You should return to England. Forget this fantasy, before you start to get a reputation for being a nigger lover." He knew immediately that he'd gone too far. But he'd had hopes, and somehow as soon as he saw her he'd known they were dashed. She was a different person, he saw that immediately.

Richard leaves the station before the train arrives. Several of the women appear, saying they've come to see her off. *To make sure she really IS leaving*, Leyah laughs to herself. For a moment, as the train pulls away from the platform, she feels a pang of sadness: the loss of happy, childish dream. But as it rattles its way down the mountain her mood lifts, and she begins to look forward to getting back to Delhi, and testing her plans. Her project excites her; who knows where it might lead. But wherever it takes her, she's certain it is a worthwhile life purpose. Something she'd be able to look back on with contentment. She still hopes to persuade Pema to come and work for her. The thought of her companionship is a relief and comfort. That it's possible to have a meaningful relationship that isn't constrained and stifled by the rigid social norms that English society forces on its women. She recalls their conversation on the Jalalabad road, and how angry she'd got. She's able to laugh at herself now; sees clearly how right Pema was.

But the next day her hopes for the future lie in ruins. Unlike when she'd arrived at Government House the first time, when every door was thrown wide open in welcome to the Heroine of Kabul, on this occasion every one is shut firmly in her face. One of the aides that had been so desperate to help her then, reluctantly agrees to meet with her. The meeting is a very short one. His manner is faintly dismissive. "There was opposition to your friend's clinic.... Yes it's been built – but that was when the trouble started.... Bureaucracy, my dear. Too many toes trodden on to start a native hospital run by an unqualified woman. No one was willing to risk their career sponsoring such a venture."

He gives her no opportunity to respond, "Now, now.... Be grateful that your friend's little clinic and school has been started. And proving quite a success by all accounts. Something you can be proud of.... Now, there's a party at the Blues Mess tonight. We'd like to extend you an invitation." He shows his teeth at this point, "Not many pretty and eligible young women around at this time of year." He gives a braying laugh, "You'd have the pick of the best of us." Leyah feels the weight of all her broken dreams, and can only stutter an acceptance of the invitation.

It takes Leyah three days before she can muster the energy to go and see Pema. She has no idea what she's going to do – perhaps even take her up on her suggestion of working with her? In a black mood, she wonders if the offer even still stands.

It's in this frame of mind that Leyah sets out alone from the opulence of Government House in a borrowed carriage. They pass through the leafy suburbs surrounding it – of wide roads lined with mansions, all kept immaculately clean at all times. And then into one of the isolated enclaves, where India's middle classes attempt to emulate their colonial masters. They're at the edge of Her World, on the border into the No Man's Land before entering the native areas, where everything has a run down look about it.

Here, in a poorly maintained park – the grass is patchy, everything looks stunted and struggling to survive – Leyah is confronted by the most unexpected sight.

She sees it first through a shimmering haze – the day is another hot one, and the vehicle lifts a trail of dust around it. Leyah blinks several times, still not believing her eyes. Each time, as it gets closer, the image solidifies. But it's almost on her before she's certain that it's real: a white carriage with a crimson upholstery and golden trim. The chauffeur is uniformed in the same garish colors, so that from a distance he'd seemed only a floating head.

The carriage stops by Leyah's and the window winds down. A thin, alabaster white hand appears and beckons to her. Its owner makes it clear he wants her to join him. At any other time she would have given her man a brisk instruction to drive on. But at that moment, just as she was about to order him on, it occurs to her that she has no reason to spurn the invitation. A clear image fills her mind – her future as a blank canvas. Supremely uninspiring in its emptiness.

The door of the white carriage opens and the hand beckons again. In the bright sunlight it's impossible to see inside. Leyah looks around her quickly – though she's unsure quite why she does so – and then tells the driver to let her down. He gives her a hard stare, "Will madam require me to wait for her?" Leyah colors momentarily, and a harsh rebuke comes to her lips. But then she realises – it's something of a shock – that she no longer cares about her reputation. Doesn't in fact care about any of The Rules which have so cloisteringly governed her life in India. She spurns them all. She stares back at the old man, until he drops his gaze, "You will wait for ten minutes. If I don't call you in that time, you can assume the gentleman will return me to Government House."

Balthazar

"He was such a fop this time! Still very handsome of course. Dashing I suppose, what with one arm of his uniform taped across his chest. But they were all so cruel and disparaging towards the natives. When some are better than they are. Superior towards them simply because of their color. But what was the point in saying anything?"

The thin, elegantly dressed man has a flop of jet black hair which he lazily pushes back from time to time to reveal an intense stare. The darkest eyes seem to draw Leyah into their fathomless depths. He is all solicitation, and seems to know exactly what to say to draw from Leyah another intimate revelation of her recent experiences. He pats her arm, "Of course not, darling, it would only get you into trouble. Pushed to the Outer, which is more dangerous for women. But," Balthazar sighs, "No individual, man or woman, can fight Society. We have to choose to step outside it to instigate meaningful change."

Leyah laughs, "You should have seen their faces, though, when I questioned the presence of The India Company here. *A parasite, it enrichens at the expense of the natives, who are the true owners of this country's national wealth.* Where DID I hear that. But I remembered, and repeated it word for word. And didn't stop there, *The Mughal Empire was more egalitarian, distributing its wealth more equitably...* But why did I bother? The boys only looked blank, as if I was speaking another language. And the girls!" Leyah titters nervously, "They rather licked their lips: lionesses around a carcass. He, Richard, even took me aside and told me in no uncertain terms that I'd gone too far. *Gone Native* was his exact epithet! Excuse me, Balthazar, I meant of course no disrespect. *Don't embarrass yourself. Or us. The defeat in Afghanistan blooded our nose; made us*

vulnerable. We must all come together and show the world a united front. That we are still the most powerful nation in the world!

“My dear, I'm sure he believed every word. And The India Company IS his world. Its entirety. But there is of course something much bigger - our vast universe - of which they are oblivious.... But we don't need to worry about them. There is so much more than this little planet we inhabit.” Balthazar notices Leyah's hesitation and he smiles encouragement, “You remind me of some of the things Pema said to me....”

“Ah, Pema. She runs that little clinic in Shadipur Depot now, doesn't she? I hear she's doing wonderful things. And not taking no for an answer from anyone! Everyone in the district council is terrified of her. Not afraid to use her fists if it warrants it. If she were a man they'd be lauding her. As it is they make snide remarks, that I won't repeat.” A fleeting doubt crosses Leyah's face. Balthazar pats her arm, “Can't be true of course. She has seven children, after all.”

Leyah seems to suddenly recollect herself. She looks at her watch and gasps, “Really! That can't be the time. I was about to tell the driver we were leaving, but he must be long gone. Sir, would you kindly drive me home?”

“Of course my dear.” Balthazar taps the roof of the carriage and they immediately move off at a sedate pace. “But there's something I wanted to ask you.... You were thinking of returning to England, but you're afraid you'll find nothing there to stimulate you.” In fact, only that morning she'd had that exact thought - it was her impetus for deciding to visit Pema. “My dear, we all have a Personal Legend. Unless we find it, and fulfill it, existence is a Lived Death.” Balthazar looks imploring at Leyah, his eyes seem to grow, two great dark pools in which she finds herself drowning. “Don't you think, darling?”

In that moment a vivid image flashes into Leyah's mind. Her a living skeleton, rotting flesh hanging off her bones. She's back in England, in a

large house. In the same room are a man and two grown children, which she takes to be her family. They too are skeletal. She cries out. And then, contemplating all her dashed hopes, the tears come. She sits on the edge of the carriage seat, her shoulders heaving, and sobs loudly. Balthazar has a comforting arm around her, murmuring platitudes of commiseration. She might not have been so quick to lean into him, and rest a tentative hand on his chest, had she seen the malevolent grin on his face. Waiting until the wracking sobs have ceased – remains only the welling of tears, and their steady flow down her cheeks – he cups her chin in his hand. “My dear, you are so much more than Pema’s little project.”

Leyah wails, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to DO. I must find out, but I don’t even know where to start.... If not Pema, what else is there?”

“My dear, that’s where my proposal might appeal to you. I heard about the rejection of your very sensible project to manage a native hospital....”

“I’d planned to build many of them, all over India....”

“Wonderful darling! And you would have helped many thousands. What if I were to tell you that you could still help.... perhaps tens of thousands?”

“A hospital?”

“No dear. Much bigger. A smattering of urchins, that will never amount to anything, whatever you teach them? No darling.”

“What then? I can’t bear my life become a Lived Death.”

Balthazar takes Leyah’s hand in his. A charge of electricity surges through her. She recoils in fright, but the effete looking man holds her hand with surprising strength. She’d expected to feel pain. She couldn’t describe the feeling: it’s something completely novel to her. She’s also suddenly very aware of her womanhood. Though his hand is like a vice, his touch is gentle, and she’s very conscious of the pressure of his fingers against hers. “My dear Leyah, I can lead you to the gates of Nirvana. And open them for you. You will find all the meaning you ever sought.”

Leyah looks despairingly into Balthazar's eyes. The black depths draw her in further. She confides to him, "I've never, in my whole life I think, known peace. I've always been running, looking for something. I suppose it's what you called the Personal Legend. But I don't know what I'm looking for. I only realised that much in Afghanistan, on the last day of the Retreat." She begins weeping again. Balthazar wraps an arm tight about her and pulls her against his chest. She lets herself be taken. "My dear, I will help you find your Personal Legend. I ask only one thing in return." Leyah's body stiffens, "... Only that you bring your people to me. They need help as much as the natives. Tell them about your guru. What he's done for you. How he's taken you to the highest level of Spiritual Awakening.... Trust me, darling, I will. Come, join me at the ashram, and I will open your eyes to the Universe and all its answers."

Leyah gives the slightest of nods. At the same moment an electricity, less intense this time, passes between them. Balthazar tightens his grip on her hand and the energy pulses into her. Gradually she begins to experience a sensation, extraordinary sensations, centred at the Base Chakra. Waves of bliss, their intensity rising and falling. Her breathing comes faster; she feels herself sweating, though the sun has set over the city and it's starting to cool. She makes no attempt to resist. At times she holds her breath, floating on the waves of pleasure that continue to emanate from her centre, spreading through her whole body. She begins to shake; her limbs go weak. She might have fallen off the carriage seat had not Balthazar held on to her. She drifts into unconscious. When she comes to she can still recall the feeling, at the last moment it was if she were dying.

The Ashram

It's dawn on the 8th of June. Leyah finds Balthazar in the Yoga Ashram – a series of rooms in a large building adjacent to the palace. It used to be a stable for the favorite elephants of a maharajah. Balthazar is naked and being sucked alternately by a male and female disciple. “See how I share the seeds of my love?” At that moment he ejaculates, so copiously that both of his acolytes gag.

“Will you join us for the dynamic meditation? My dear, you've seemed very up tight these last days. I'm sure it would do you the world of good. And we have a new ensemble – they've written music especially for the dance.”

“No, I'm.... we have serious business to discuss.... No, now.” Balthazar sighs heavily, “Really, do we HAVE to?” And then gives an exaggerated shrug, “I presume it's about the chateau.” Leyah is only momentarily taken aback, now well used to Balthazar's clairvoyant abilities. She grabs him by the arm. Still naked, laughing, he allows himself to be dragged into an adjoining room which is presently empty. “I can't believe this, after all I've done for you.... When I've finally recognised my Personal Legend.”

Balthazar scoffs, “Do you really think I care about any of this? I involve myself purely to stave off the crashing boredom. There's NOTHING in this world that remotely intrigues me. And your petty foray into medical....”

“I plan to build a native hospital in every city in India....”

“Exactly. While I want a chateau near Lourdes....” He gives a play of mild concern, “A little too much enthusiasm there at the moment!So what I used the money you've been tucking away, the assiduous mouse, for the last few years? Gone darling! Get over it. Down payment on my new home, which has the added advantage of several splendid vineyards. The novelty should distract me for a little while. So, Leyah darling, Boo Hoo to you. I'd say sorry, if I meant it.”

The confrontation with Balthazar has not gone as Leyah had expected. For a second she thinks to argue with him, but from the look on his face she

sees she could only expect to be further humiliated. She turns and walks away. Balthazar laughs, "Darling, why don't you join us? They're giving their first performance of the music today... But darling, you DO look stressed. And you know my meditations are The Bomb! Everyone's saying so."

Leyah stops abruptly and swivels round. She knows Balthazar is deliberately trying to provoke her, but she can't help herself. "Yours? NOTHING of this is yours. You stole it all. You know perfectly well those meditations came from that peasant Upasani."

The furious interchange of letters between Balthazar and Meher Baba, when he was at the height of his fame, was just one of the many confrontations engineered by Balthazar against the famous mystics and gurus of the day - Upasani, Hazrat Babajan and the others - for no other purpose than to promote himself and the ashram into the public eye. The newspapers of course loved him for it.

"What can I say about the fellow, except that he's a complete charlatan, and a fool. Of COURSE there are only five Mukammils on earth at any time - everyone knows that. But ours being the only planet where they reside? Ridiculous! There's a universe out there with a billion planets! And a million Mukammils. And I've met several of them." It was still the early days of the ashram, and Balthazar had invited a journalist to attend the opening of the new yoga halls.

"But Meher Baba claims to be The Avatar - that he can be present everywhere in the Universe."

"Well he would, wouldn't he? But does he know that your mother died last Friday night at 8.07?" Balthazar leant forward conspiratorially, "And that you can now leave your wife and invite your boyfriend to join you at your secret apartment at Amritsar?" The journalist looked aghast, "....No, I don't suppose he did.... I am The Avatar. And I'm not some lackey either. I am of The

Trinity. The Ancient One. I live eternally in a state of Divine Consciousness. I am everything and everyone. In the Beyond State.”

The journalist, if nothing else as a caution against public revelation of his secrets, became one of the ashram's most ardent plaudits. In fact was one of it's earliest disciples. Though this may have had more to do with Balthazar's cryptic (in typical fashion) insinuation that an apartment would always be available to him for private assignations with his lovers.

Now, Balthazar's movement, Bal Baba, has as many devotees, across all India, as the other leading spiritual cults of the day. His reputation as a guru is unrivaled, and is particularly famous for his idiosyncratic teaching through obtuse parables. They are so filled with obscure and convoluted metaphors that the listener is forced to define its meaning for themselves. Ask ten people that have heard one of his parables, and each would attribute a different understanding of it. And by now he has little need for promotion among the Europeans. In 1847, ten years to the day before its start, before an audience of them collected by Leyah, Balthazar predicted The Indian Mutiny.

The tornado that was the Mutiny is a distant memory, but the winds of change have never fully died. The more astute among the Whites have recognised and accepted that the theatre of Empire is drawing to a close. There is, after all, an end to even the best parties. They have sought out new adventures, new meaning. And many of them, thanks in no small part to Leyah's efforts, have discovered it in the ashrams founded in Balthazar's name. As word spread, Leyah also found an interested audience among the upper echelons of Indian society. In short, over the last twenty years Leyah has become the ashram's most successful recruiter of donor disciples. And it has made her very powerful.

When Leyah first joined the ashram, back in '42, her motive had been wholly altruistic. But, with subtle encouragement from Balthazar, she used

her growing influence to climb up the ashram's hierarchy. With her success, in reality there were few serious rivals to stand in her way. Today she is President of the Bal Baba Corporation, the very profitable business arm of the ashram. To her surprise, she'd found excitement in the wielding of power, and soon became adept at maintaining it, by establishing around her loyal subordinates in all positions of authority. With a solid financial foundation in place in Delhi, she further grounded herself by funding new ashrams in all the major cities.

With Leyah's star rising, Balthazar allowed himself to fade into the background, and she became the face of the movement. He always deferred to her whenever pressed by other disciples complaining about her unchallenged authority. His removal from the public eye did not prevent him gaining some infamy for his lavish lifestyle. A few years after Leyah's arrival the Delhi ashram moved to the edge of the city, adjacent to a former maharajah's opulent palace, where Balthazar took up residence. To detractors he always responded, "I treat everyone the same, as a god. As I treat myself." He also reputedly possesses ninety identical, luxuriously appointed carriages, pulled by a stable of the finest black thoroughbreds.

Balthazar deliberately maintains an air of sexual tension throughout the ashram. On a typical day he will start with a naked yoga session, accompanied by several male and female disciples. The men are required to maintain an erection throughout. If they flag they must stop and be stimulated by one of the other disciples. He spends part of every day walking, naked of course, around the one hundred acre grounds, while philosophizing in parables. A secretary follows him everywhere he goes – literally everywhere – and records it all. A transcript is published in a privately funded weekly magazine.

Balthazar has several peculiar habits, which no one is allowed to question. Coming out of meditation he is often angered by the least thing,

and will beat and throw stones at any disciples nearby. During the philosophy sessions he is wont to eat the faeces of some of his Kamills – his inner spiritual circle. The day's selection of apostles, after consuming a full breakfast, would follow him in procession through the gardens, in the hope of having the honor of defecating into his mouth. Whenever asked why he does this, he only gives a broad smile, displaying his shit stained teeth. Every hour or so he'd stop, and point at one of them. The Chosen One would then squat over him and push out a turd. He might wash it down with their, or another's, piss. If particularly verbose that day he might consume five or more logs, as if it were fuel for his musings. Though a sophisticate, and normally well spoken, Balthazar often adopts the coarse manner of an uneducated laborer, swearing and using only the simplest vocabulary.

At the investiture of new disciples in the main hall, Balthazar always begins with an introduction to his teachings. "It is essential for spiritual advancement to rescind all that ties you to the physical world. And to give yourself up to your guru, The Avatar. First, renounce your wealth and worldly possessions. Second, cut ties with all your friends in the outside world. Disciples must be dependent on the ashram for their physical survival – for clothes, food, shelter, and relationships. Only through the rejection of the material can we begin to experience true and lasting happiness. Its pursuit is the reason for our existence. You will hear disciples complain that they cannot rid themselves of sadness. It is alright to feel that. But do not be frustrated. Do not feel a failure. It only means that you've not yet broken through to Nirvana. Do not worry, I will take you there, for I have the remedy. The first moment we experience sadness we must counter the poison, through meditation, through The Practices. But it starts with Renunciation – a refusal to allow sadness to enter our lives. For then we become self absorbed.... The first ritual will now begin."

With the initiates already naked, Balthazar instructs them to lie on their backs, "Close your eyes, and keep them closed until you're told to open them again. Anyone that does not comply with this, and any other rules, will be escorted from the ashram." Disciples then come into the hall; all of them carry straps made of the finest calf leather. They then go among the initiates whipping them lightly. Their flagellation continues until the initiates are taken to an agony of anticipation of the next touch of the strop; it would take only the shortest stimulation for them to reach orgasm. And here they are returned, again and again. Stretched to breaking, the limit of sexual tension, but no further. This is barely the beginning of the initiation, though it is a good presage of all that follows.

After the disciples leave Balthazar continues, "The next part of your introduction to the ashram will take place in The Garden. It is secret – you must not reveal it to anyone. Only The Initiated are allowed to enter it." A section of the palace grounds has a high wall surrounding it. In its centre is a large building with several levels both above and below ground. The entrances are monitored by armed guards. "Anyone entering the Garden of Eden must be naked. Within its walls all sexual boundary and limitation is removed. You may enjoy any sexual adventure – limited only by your imagination – in absolute anonymity." This is achieved by requiring everyone in the enclave – including the guards – to don a sack like head covering made of a light material which renders the wearer almost completely blind.

In the Sex Rooms a vow of silence is strictly imposed: communication is only allowed through touch. Guards remove anyone that speaks and they're banned from ever entering The Garden of Eden again. "Any sexual act is permitted. But only if explicitly agreed to by both participants. Within Eden's walls our disciples are free to discover their sexual being to the deepest level possible. Explore and experiment without constraint or limitation. The only rule is Love."

If only that were the case. As with everything at the ashram, though perhaps no more so than in Eden, the reality is almost the exact opposite to that promoted. People are broken here. And whatever the deviation, it was always first initiated by Balthazar. He is The Magi. The High Priest of sexual dominance and exploitation of the weak by the powerful. Here the English aristocracy and Indian HiSo may find their sexual, if not spiritual, home.

And it is little different with the Faith teachings. Balthazar, in his introduction to his new disciples, declares the end of patriarchal formal religion. And then in the same speech strictly formalizes the spiritual doctrines of the ashram. For the first weeks the initiates are allowed only a few hours sleep a day. He openly states, "The goal is to destroy the individuated self, to enable you to subjugate to The Higher Powers." Fifty six Kammils are selected from among the disciples across all the ashrams. Only Balthazar can elect or demote them. From their number he anoints the five Mukammils, who are permitted to represent him in the execution of the ashram's spiritual practices.

Through this means - while the corporate wheels continue to turn, with Leyah at the helm, and with a degree of independent power - Balthazar maintains with relative ease an iron fist of control over the ashram and its spiritual core. Machiavelli was only a student by comparison. Whatever grand titles Balthazar bestows on them, the ashram whirls with political intrigue as his disciples fight constantly among themselves for his approval. To gain promotion as a Kammil, or to the pinnacle of the Mukammil. And to avoid demotion, in the extreme a banishment from the Bal Baba movement altogether.

Scandal

Leyah is as much a product of Balthazar's indoctrination as the rest of his apostles. In all its grotesque manifestations. To her it therefore seems quite natural that, to ensure the loyalty and absolute devotion of her personal bodyguards, she should stand over them and piss in their mouths.

Handcuffed, naked, she has them leashed on dog collars. After showering them in yellow she forces each down on to the bare concrete, where she places a booted foot on their head. Held down, she abuses them – each attack is intimately personal, for she knows everything about them. The sting of her words cut deeper than any lash of the whip that follows. She then requires them lick her. If dissatisfied – and The Dominatrix is rarely fully appeased – she might give a sharp tug on one of the nipple or genital clamps the menial attached to themselves.

Leyah has ordered this session of Loyalty Yoga to be attended by all of her Inner Guards. It takes place the day following her humiliation by Balthazar, and his repeated refusal to refund the money she'd allocated to establish the first of her Native Hospitals.

Though only a small force – there's ever a core of twelve, comprising an equal number of men and women – they are better trained than any other guerrilla unit in existence. They could easily outmaneuver and defeat a force twenty times their size. Were forced to on one occasion in the early days, when supporters of another sect, jealous of Bal Baba's success, had tried to burn down the ashram while all the disciples inside were asleep. They are expert in assassination, infiltration, bombing, and torture. Taught by Balthazar in its subtleties, Leyah uses sexual domination and humiliation to exert absolute control over them. They are devoted to her and share allegiance with no other.

Each of the twelve, separately, comes into her private Sex Chamber, a room on the top floor of The Building at Eden. They find Leyah propped up among an ocean of cushions, on a vast bed which fills half the room. The first, a woman, stands at the door, her expression a mix of hesitation and anticipation. Leyah gives a throaty laugh and beckons with a long curled finger. Her nails and lipstick are an identical blood red. She is wearing only black stockings, that emphasise her long legs, that have the perfect hint of plumpness: flesh, to be devoured. A connoisseur might notice that all her female guards have a similar physique.

Seven knows what she has to do. She gently pries Leyah's legs apart, running fingers lightly down the inside of her thighs as she does so. Face buried in her thick bush, she savors the rich aroma of her prominent Sex, while exhaling long breaths over her already engorged clitoris. A cool tongue runs over spread lips. She gently sucks on her. When ready they mount each other, legs intertwined. Leyah, dominant, makes love to *Seven*, t ribbing her until she's taken to the edge. Sees her eyes start to roll back, judges the heat of her, and then stops abruptly. *Seven* can only smile at Leyah's unflinching ability to predict how far she can take her before she'd tumble over the edge into ecstasy. Before she leaves, dutifully *Seven* kisses Leyah. Though chaste – their lips share only the lightest pressure – her flesh quivers at Leyah's slightest touch.

Leyah repeats The Devotion with the rest of the Inner Guards. With her men she strides atop, riding them to the edge of climax, never sparing the whip. Then straps on and fucks them. The others, waiting outside the room, hear their screams and pleas for more, in an ecstasy of bliss withdrawn. Their only desire is she take them. They are hers, and hers alone.

That night, in the early hours, The Garden of Eden is as silent as it must have been the first time humans entered the Original. Leyah, with her

guards in attendance, are in the lowest basement of The Building. She talks casually to them – exchanging small talk, or inquiring about their spiritual progress – until she feels the right mood has been established. An intimate familiarity, but always constrained by a respectful deference. And this evening, an edge of excitement, an anticipation, sensing that Leyah has planned a major play. All are wondering if they will be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, which they pledged when accepting the invitation to join The Inner Guards. None have the remotest intimation of what Leyah is about to tell them. What she’s been planning for weeks since she first learned of the disappearance of the Hospitals fund. Money she regarded as HERS.

“It was theft! And for what purpose! The hospitals, of which the one in Amritsar will be the first, will serve yours and other families, in all the poorest communities. They will receive the best medical care in all of India, treated by the the most skilled doctors, in world class facilities, using the latest equipment. And so we must!” Leyah pounds her fist against the table, “We must get the money back. So that we can immediately start building the first hospital. Once we show what can be done, it will be easy to get funding for the rest.” She looks around the room at the expectant, concentrated faces. “So, your first mission is to replace the funds, with money now held by the other ashrams. Until we have the exact same amount that was stolen – no more, no less. For this mission you will work alone.” They know there’s more, and the tension in the room is at breaking point.

“The second mission requires three volunteers.... Wait, before you all step forward, I must tell you that it concerns the oath you pledged to me. This is a suicide mission.... to kill Bal Baba.... We then replace him with one of the Mukammils that supports the Hospitals project. There are several. If we don’t do this, they will never be built. The money will be wasted on frivolous

luxuries, or frittered away into corrupt pockets. Of which we know there are many at the ashrams. At last, the Movement can be all that he promised us!"

Leyah knows that she's risking everything. But it's worth it. She has seen her Personal Legend. It had been within reach, and Balthazar had snatched it from her. He alone stands between her and its realization. And she had Revelation that he always would. The thought of challenging him terrifies her. But what is the alternative but a Lived Death? Despite her conviction of its justification, she has doubts of her guards. In devising the attack she was certain some of them, perhaps all, would refuse to kill Balthazar. It thus takes all her willpower to conceal her emotions when, without hesitation, all twelve of her Inner Guard step forward, offering up their lives to her.

Leyah has never underestimated Balthazar. She therefore reckoned it only prudent to remove herself until all the operations are completed. It's two days after she'd revealed her intentions to her bodyguards, who the next morning all departed Amritsar, nine of them to execute the first part of the mission. The other three had gone into hiding in Delhi, where Balthazar is currently in residence. In that time Leyah made her way to the ashram near Karachi.

She's now awaiting a yacht, which will take her to Ceylon, where she's negotiating to establish the first ashram in that country, in the port city of Colombo. She's made rich and powerful friends there who, crucially, have as yet had no personal contact with Balthazar. She believes it's the safest place she could wait out the coup. But in her heart she knows that nowhere is beyond Balthazar's malevolent reach.

She can see the white sails of the yacht. In the stiff breeze the sleek white shape is heeled over and racing toward the narrow entrance to the private harbor. It once belonged to an obsessive Mughal emperor, who was determined to own the fastest fleet of yachts ever built. In half an hour, she

estimates, she should expect to be aboard the boat and on her way to Colombo.

Her hopes surge. At that moment she's aware that she never actually expected to escape him. And this is immediately followed by the realization that it didn't matter. The only thing that did: she was pursuing her Personal Legend. Or rather, at last, striving for the right one. At the start she had of course believed that being in the ashram, following Balthazar, was living it. After only a few years she'd realised she'd made the biggest mistake of her life. But at the same time had been trapped in the possibility that she might still find her Personal Legend through her position of authority in the ashram. Or was it just ego? And enjoying the power? She'd become so confused she didn't know what to believe or what to do.

And then, by chance, she'd bumped into Pema, whose small clinic and school had grown no bigger, but still continued to flourish. During their conversation she'd experienced a vivid awakening. She'd recalled her long forgotten ambition. Though she saw that back then it was driven only by her ego: a vanity project. But at the same time realised that, in her hospitals, she could at last find her true Personal Legend. And through funds held by the Bal Baba corporation, which she controlled, she could easily fund their building. And so start out on the road to the realization of her Legend.

Leyah has just instructed her aide to collect her bags from the carriage when she hears a loud commotion, and the sound of gunfire. She'd had the nine guards, once they'd completed their mission to recover the money, to come to the harbor and stand sentry at its entrance. The guard house, which stands on the crest of a hill, is lit up by several explosions. After that the shooting continues for several more minutes, but then stops abruptly. A few minutes later the remnants of the Inner Guard – three women, all badly wounded – run down the jetty, shouting for Leyah to leave. On reaching her

they all collapse on the ground. One tells her, "We were ambushed by Bal Baba's guards. He was leading them."

A volley of shots rings out. The heads of the three women explode, showering Leyah in gore. Five minutes later Balthazar appears at the steps leading down to the jetty. He is alone, but there's the sound of movement in the nearby undergrowth, and many figures, silhouettes only, stand on the hill crest overlooking the harbor.

Half way down the jetty, protected by thick stone walls on three sides, is a large timber structure with floor to ceiling windows on the seaward side, that in daylight offer a magnificent view of the ocean. Leyah is seated in a large rattan chair looking out into the darkness. Balthazar takes another, places it opposite hers, and sits down. For several minutes they only stare at each other.

Balthazar smiles shyly at her. In any situation, as this does, he knows exactly what to do to most unsettle her. In a quiet voice, without emotion, he tells her, "The reason they didn't shoot you too, was that I wanted you to know that I've anticipated this meeting, for twenty years. Planned it before you'd even met me. It just happened to be you that day." He adds, conversationally, "But there is one every day, at least.... You know, I lied when I said that nothing in this existence stimulates me. It is only entertainment, but I do still get quite a KICK out of rendering a life meaningless." He gestures with his foot to emphasise his point, "Of which yours, I'm afraid my dear, is but one in a long list." He laughs lightly, "Goodness, a very long list!" Balthazar pauses and rubs his chin. Leyah senses it's only for effect, "You know, through all time there is an infinite supply of willing victims. The amusement comes in the variety – of the deception; their occupation, which they believe SO important. And the prize of their reaction when they realise...." Balthazar sniggers, ".... In fact my tracks are so well covered, they rarely guess until I've told them." He raises his eyebrows and looks

inquiringly at Leyah, but she only continues to look out to sea, at the now disappearing white yacht. "... The futility their life has been. The pointless effort and hardship they willingly endured in the mistaken belief – for which I take ALL the credit – that they were making a difference."

There is still fight left in Leyah. Without warning, she launches herself out of her chair and stands over Balthazar, glaring at him. "I don't know why you're telling me this. MY life hasn't been a waste at all. I might have failed to achieve my Personal Legend, but in the end I saw what it was, and I've tried to complete it. There's some shame, but I don't even care about that. So I ordered some assassinations.... I'd do it again if the ends were justified.... It was all I could do."

His voice remaining flat, in contrast with the stridence in Leyah's manner, Balthazar shakes his head, wearing an expression of deep sorrow. But in the next instant he's smiling lightly, as if at a pleasant recollection, "But that's not really true, is it? You had your guru all along, to guide you. You should have joined her.... You were on your way to her when I diverted you. I saw a meaningful life, and the temptation to destroy it was too great. If not for me, between the two of you the hospitals would have been built. Not on the grand scale you envisaged. But you would have made countless thousands of bitter, harsh lives more bearable. And now.... I'll make a solemn promise to you Leyah: not one of your hospitals will ever be built." The few times Leyah had seen Pema she was surrounded by laughing, loving children. Whenever she thinks of her she associates Pema with joy, and a sense of peace. In the end she hated to go there. As her frustration grew, Leyah came to despise Pema. It's more than ten years since she's seen her.

Leyah has returned to her chair, and is sitting stiffly erect. So much the Head Girl, as she'd been at her little convent school, that in her childhood had been her whole world. Her shoulders slump and her head drops

forward. A moment later she slides off her chair and sits cross legged on the floor, her hands in her lap. She looks down at them.

“Thank you darling.” Balthazar stares at her for some time. “You know, there is a LITTLE spice in my game. I don’t get it all my own way. We compete over a Soul. Perhaps they had them first.... They CANNOT be better. Whatever else I am,” Balthazar theatrically polishes his nails, then holds them out to look at them, and nods, looking pleased with himself. He glances at Leyah and pretends a sad face, only moments later abandoning it, “I am the ultimate salesman. And I have an infinite array of wares with which to tempt them.” For the first time he shows some emotion, “Pah! They think it’s so easy to choose a life purpose! It’s the most precious thing: Time unrecoverable.... How many lifetimes wasted.... It requires the greatest caution in its selection. And at the start of life who is equipped to make a wise choice? Know thyself. Your limitations. Better to seek the wise advice of a guru. They will guide you to the door of your Personal Legend.... But even then, how? How tell they’re not an incompetent. Or, worse still, me! Do you have anything to say Leyah? I have rather rattled on.”

Leyah only shakes her head, “Thank you darling. I was rather dreading my little lecture being drawn out.... There is of course no other way to finish this....” Without a word Leyah holds out her hand, “Give me the gun.” He hands it to her. She weighs the heavy revolver in her hand for several minutes, occasionally turning it over, or thumbing the chamber. Its rattle is the only sound, the wind outside having now died. In the distance one might catch the faint chirp of birds. But Leyah only hears the pounding of her heart. Her breath comes with difficulty; she has to make a conscious effort to breath. For a moment she thinks to shoot Balthazar. But when she opens her eyes he just smiles and shakes his head. The revolver becomes so heavy in her hand she can’t lift it. She closes her eyes again.

Balthazar reaches down and take her hand in his. She feels the ecstasy to a level never experienced before, and is reminded of the first time. She allows herself the bliss: wave after wave of pleasure filling her body. A faint breeze blows through the gazebo: her skin becomes on fire. She anticipates orgasm, but then it dies, and the bliss dies with it. She raises the gun to her head. Eyes still closed she starts to feel herself floating. Balthazar is on her; she feels the weight of him pressing on her body. She gasps as he enters her; gasps again as she feels herself filled by him. Every pulse, throb of him, is a wave of indescribable pleasure. She feels the swell of him and she responds, gripping him tighter. The ecstasy heightens. She sees herself floating towards an invisible edge; her body writhing, Balthazar, an animal, covering her. But at the moment she would be taken over, experience *le petit mort*, all feeling suddenly leaves her. She hears – it is within her – the loud explosion of the gun.

It does not have to be SO hard. But Leyah persisted in thinking she knew better. And so it would be another five hundred years, a thousand lifetimes, before for the first time she would live to its fullest her Personal Legend.

Book

Two

Karma

Flying low over the vast snow covered plains, suddenly a metres thick wall of ice, glass transparent, projects out of the ground. It happens so fast, so unexpectedly, the computer systems are unable to react quickly enough to avert disaster. The plane attempts to climb, but too late and the lower deck slams into the ice wall, crumples and then neatly rips off along the joint between the two decks. The scientists, all in the labs at that moment, are killed on impact and the debris from this section of the plane is scattered over a wide area of the arctic wasteland. However, what's left of the craft, wings still intact, is able to make a forced landing. While still in the plane Leyah, the only survivor, tries radioing for help. But as the now burning craft sinks into the melting snow and the electronics begin popping and fizzing, the entire electrical system shuts down. Leyah scrambles through the emergency hatch on the roof of the forward deck, dragging with her whatever essentials she'd been able to lay her hands on.

All around her a blinding, ethereal white, and totally alone in the Vast Nothingness, Leyah stares, still not believing it, as the craft disappears slowly into the ice: the lowering of a coffin. When it's almost completely submerged, the plane rolls on its side and the nose drops. The craft arrows down into the water - in a second it's gone forever. Still in a state of mute shock, Leyah looks about her, for the first time consciously taking in her surroundings. A few hundred metres away the wall of ice is rapidly rising once again, reaching its peak in only a few seconds, to then sink more slowly, the whole cycle taking several minutes. Despite her perilous circumstances, Leyah is entranced by its slow motion: the only movement in this seemingly infinite expanse of snow and ice.

The plain runs as far as the eye can see in all directions before disappearing into a clouded, overcast sky, which gives everything a damp, heavy feel. Beside her lie the few items she was able to rescue before the jet sank: a bundle of warm clothing, enough food to last a week, and a self expanding tent. But the most important items she'd rescued, ones which give her the faintest glimmer of hope of making it back to civilisation, are a personal jet pack and a set of skis.

In fact, though facing almost certain death, at that moment reckoning her chances of survival is the least thing on Leyah's mind. For her there is something which holds a far greater fear. It is the overwhelming sense of her absolute aloneness. A vivid image fills her mind – of her wandering, helplessly lost, through an infinity of space, for time without end. This terror, of completely unreasonable proportion, she tries again and again to push from her mind but she cannot, and in the end she gives up. Despite the urgency of her predicament, as night begins to fall and the icy winds whip through her flimsy clothing, she sinks to her knees and calls to her mother, pleading for her help. In this her darkest hour, Leyah turns instinctively to the person who'd always claimed – despite all the evidence to the contrary – to be there for her. Again and again she'd been disappointed by her mother's fickle self absorption. But throughout her childhood – even as an adult – she'd still irrationally convinced herself that she was the one person that could be relied upon. Bound by these chains of misplaced love, she'd only been released by her mother's untimely death.

Curling up into as small a ball as she can make herself, Leyah, lost in a world of self pity, begins screaming. Only when her clothes become sodden, and the intense cold begins to seep into her bones, does she finally get to her feet and attempt to do anything to save herself. She tries to recall the advice the scientists had given her about survival, should they crash and be forced to walk out. She'd taken little of it in since, if she'd thought about it at

all, she'd doubted very much if it would ever happen. She hits herself about the head, sinking to her knees again, crying out with frustration. She can remember nothing. Nothing that is except that she must head north, away from the pole and towards warmer climates. She looks half expectantly into the sky, but it's as white and featureless as the snow covered plain. She cries out again. *Why is this happening to me!* Her only answer is the low moan of the ice, but she's unable to decipher its meaning.

It's almost dark now. There's nothing for it but to erect the tent and gain some warmth by starting a fire with some of the ice lighters. With black depression sinking over her mind, a legacy of her mother's own mental illness, she can barely summon the energy to even do that, despite knowing that unless she has proper shelter and raises her body temperature she will be dead in the hour. If not for the modifications made by the scientists to her exosuit only days earlier, death would have most likely already taken place. The lethargy, the desire to simply lie down and go to sleep, almost completely swallows her.

What's the point? I'm never going to get out of here alive. Me ? Survive in this wilderness?But did it really matter anyway? Hadn't Mother always told me, not so much with words but with her attitude, that I was worthless? That I didn't deserve to exist and was an inconvenience that was endured on sufferance. Don't expect anything from me: that was implicit.

But if it had come down to something SHE'D wanted, an army wouldn't have stopped her getting it. Whatever it was, she hadn't given a fig what anyone thought of her. Despite the effects this had had on Leyah's own life, in the complex tension of her relationship with her mother, this indifference to opinion was actually one of the things she'd admired most about her.

Whatever had had the resemblance to love, Leyah had realised as she'd got older, was for appearances only. What was expected of a woman, a mother. She'd often wondered if her mother felt anything at all. Thus

inculcated from early childhood, she'd barely felt she had the right to occupy the space she existed in. Naturally, as she grew older the crushing of her self esteem had distorted her perspective of the world. *Didn't the world look down on her, wasn't it always against her?*

Her father had tried to encourage her, and bring out her talents, but whenever she'd achieved success it was so alien she'd still felt worthless and undeserving, and would run back to her mother, and away from the unfamiliar feeling. What little positive she'd had in her life had been swiftly snuffed out by her mother's subtle condescension, and belittling of her achievements. Her youth, her formative years, had been as these plains, cold and devoid of anything beautiful, except the shining star of her mother's presence - the most beautiful woman she'd ever laid eyes on. And it was a star she'd followed blindly, without question, ignoring her father's pleas to see reason, to learn to believe in herself.

Leyah ponders, what would her mother have done in this situation? The woman who'd always had a plausible answer. Though in recent years, as her own understanding of existence had evolved, Leyah had come to see how wrong her mother's decisions invariably were. Particularly in her choice of friends and lovers. But in a crisis she was indomitable. What would she do now? The thought helps Leyah overcome the stultifying depression she's sunk into, which has concentrated her conscious to a narrow black cell with high windowless walls - a prison of the mind.

Shaking off her lassitude, Leyah takes the tent from its packaging and - after a few futile attempts to initiate its self assembly, which reduces her to further floods of tears - it finally inflates and embeds itself in the ice. By this point she can feel herself weakening, and this realization spurs her on. Within a few minutes she has all the equipment stowed in the tent, which has proved more capacious than she'd expected. And, some time later, with an ice fire blazing in the centre of the tent, a hot meal inside her, she feels

her strength rise. The sense of being a victim, such a familiar, diminishes a little.

She starts to recall some of the advice the boffins had given her. Especially one of them, a particular nerd she'd considered him - he'd just had that look. He was completely smitten by Leyah, and had gone on incessantly about when he'd been stranded in a similar environment. "The stars and moon will save you. Line up the ... the ..." She couldn't remember the rest: she'd found him over earnest and irritating; someone easy to make fun of.

Wrapping herself in a warm coat she steps outside and looks up. Expecting a blank, black canvas, she's amazed by what she sees. The night sky is full of light. The moons, vertically above one another, casting a blurred, silver filter over everything, while the stars are a wash of multi colored lights flashing like gaudy neon. And the sky itself is not so much black, as every shade of color in its darkest hue, spiraling into patterns which mesmerize her.

As her thoughts are slowed by the entrancing skyscape she begins to recall more of what the scientist had said. At the same time she feels a stabbing pain in her heart, realizing how unjust she'd been with him. Hadn't he only been trying to help, and aren't we all guilty of desperation when we want something or someone bad enough?

Leyah can recall enough of her own futile, myriad attempts to raise genuine feelings in her mother. And those instances, which make her cringe when she thinks of them now, when she'd detach herself if Leyah displayed her feelings too obviously - her face becoming a blank mask, or showing faint disdain. The picture so clear: of making something for her and she'd feign delight but with a sleight, deliberate she realised now, and in this way the woman would subtly indicate her supreme disinterest in Leyah. How true it is that you can't draw water from an empty well. She could admit it to

herself now, as an adult: her mother was incapable of love. She knew it as a child too, but always pushed it down. But of course it was always there in her subconscious: an open wound that bled over her childhood.

As recollections of the conversations with the nerdy scientist resurface, she recalls, hadn't he said something about three stars lining up beneath the moons, in a triangular arrow formation, and that this line was true north, or close enough to it? *And there they are!* she laughs.... *But how is that going to help in daylight?* Setting this concern aside for the moment, conscious that that she doesn't have the luxury of time, despite an at times paralyzing fear of the dark, Leyah decides to explore her surroundings. Unfortunately, just as she's convinced herself to leave the tent, a bank of clouds blots out the moons and stars.

And so, though an expert skier, it's a very cautious Leyah that pushes off, telemarking slowly away from the warm, comforting light of the tent, into the gloom. She'd chosen the direction at random since it was all an identical, featureless black. She keeps looking over her shoulder, back at the tent.

Leyah's mouth is dry, and her heart's pounding. She's had an irrational fear of the dark ever since, as a teenager, she'd woken up in the middle of the night to find one of her mother's lovers, a wealthy businessman with an impeccable social pedigree, sitting at the end of her bed staring at her. It was summer, when she always slept naked, with only a sheet pulled over her. It was now pulled back, far enough down to reveal her breasts and vagina. The moon had cast a slant of silver light across his face, giving it a disembodied, ghostly appearance. His eyes still staring, they'd seemed to grow enormous. When she'd finally managed to scream he hadn't moved, only given a small smile. He seemed to take pleasure in her terror.

It had taken an age for her mother to finally appear. And when she did, she'd only scolded him, and made light of Leyah being exposed to him. They'd walked out of her bedroom hand in hand, talking about something else, and

laughing. Left alone, terrified that he might come back and do something to her, she'd had to lock her bedroom door before she'd felt safe enough to go back to bed and try to sleep.

The fear grows in Leyah the further she gets away from the womb like security of the tent. And then the familiar nightmare starts - that she's living a horror movie. That something - the worst horror of all, of something unknown, without face or form - is going to leap out of the darkness at her. It takes all her courage to keep going - telling herself over and over that her survival depends on her getting out of the arctic as soon as possible. Every day, every hour, will count.

Fortunately, after skiing only a few hundred metres from the tent, the clouds drift away. Her eyes have adjusted to the dark, and with all the lights in the night sky, and their reflection off the snow, it's almost as if it were daylight. It gives her hope - *It should actually be quite safe to travel at night.... Anyway, I don't have a choice since I only have the moons and stars to guide me.* Making her way back to the tent she looks for fault in her plan, but can find none. So she packs up the tent, and straps her meagre possessions into a bundle on top of it. She then ties the entire contraption to her belt. Testing it, she finds the swag drags behind her quite comfortably.

At this point it strikes her that the greatest danger lies in deviating from a straight path, to end up meandering back to where she's started. Thinking for a moment, she retrieves the ice lighter, pours a few drops on the snow, she then crouches down and sets it alight. A thin, blindingly white flame shoots upward, almost catching the sleeve of her heavy arctic coat. She jumps back, slips, and falls flat on her back. When another time it might have disheartened her, perhaps set off another trail of self recrimination, on this occasion her only thought is whether the flame will be big enough, bright enough, for her to see from a distance. She refuses to allow herself the luxury of self pity.

Her plan is to set a flare every few kilometers, and so long as she keeps them lined up behind her she should maintain a straight path. But now for the moment of truth - she must test her plan. Doggedly blanking all thoughts of failure, Leyah straps the jetpack on her back, and clamps her boots into her skis. But then, just as she's about to start the jetpack, without any prelude of conscious thought, a few tears spring into Leyah's eyes as she contemplates, for the first time, the death of her companions, and particularly the young scientist. It was, after all, him that one morning had taken her on a tour of the aircraft, from time to time pointing at some object she might need in an emergency. With surprise she realises that everything he'd advised her to take, instinctively had she rescued it from the wreckage, and that without every single one of the items she'd have had no hope of survival.

In fact Leyah had been hoping to put off this moment at least until the morning. She's very wary of the jetpack, since generally she has an aversion to anything with an engine attached to it. Or rather, they seem to have an aversion to her. But she knows she can't delay any longer. She tells herself to stop being ridiculous, this is no time to allow her phobias to take over. But only gets the response back, *Well, who wouldn't, with a mother like mine, have a Full House of hangups to fuck me up!* Blanking her mind she presses the starter button.

The jet pack roars into life. Unexpectedly this lifts her spirits. Amidst the terror of her situation, its unpredictability - each moment throwing up life and death choices which she's supremely ill equipped to deal with - the sense of its comforting reliability reassures her - the instant start of the engine, and its low, steady throb, never missing a beat. Mentally crossing her fingers, she very cautiously opens the throttle. The power of the jetpack is far greater than she'd been expecting, and Leyah's thrown forward onto

the snow. Her skis spin off into the gloom, and for a few moments she flails ineffectually as the roaring engine presses her face into the snow.

Releasing the throttle, instinctively she looks around, then laughs to herself, *At least here I can make as much of a fool of myself and no one's going to see!* Getting to her feet, and brushing herself down, she curses the scientists aloud, *What were those crazy boffins thinking when they designed this thing! Hadn't she barely touched the accelerator and it had sent her flying?*

But what other options are there? And complaining isn't going to get me any closer to out of here. Looking around she soon finds her skis and puts them back on. Firing up the jetpack again, this time she braces her legs, as if about to start a running race. And then, even more tentatively than in her last attempt, she slowly twists the throttle grip.

This time she meets with some success. As she takes off, it reminds her of when she first learned to ride a bicycle. There's a few wobbles, but she manages to stay up for a few hundred metres before getting herself thoroughly tangled up in her skis. Losing her balance, she tips onto her side and with the throttle still open she begins slowly spinning around in a circle. Picturing what she must look like she bursts out laughing, so much so she forgets to release the throttle grip and continues spinning for a few more revolutions before finally coming to a stop.

The wind has dropped, and the only sound now is the echo of her laughter. It hits her hard – how totally alone she is. And then, harder still, the impossible enormity of the predicament she faces. *Me, of all people. What are my chances of ever making it out of here alive!* She starts to berate herself, as she has so often in the past, blaming herself for something beyond her control. *Most likely I'll last a few days and then do something stupid. Isn't that how it usually goes? I've never been in a situation remotely*

like this... Hadn't the scientists said that many experienced explorers had died out here? Really, aren't I kidding myself?

But what choice does Leyah have? When the only alternative is to lie down on the ice and wait for hypothermia to drift her into sleep. Shaking herself down, Leyah prepares herself once more. Again she manages to get going without incident and, confident in her skiing ability, she pushes herself and is soon skimming over the snow. She even starts to enjoy herself, experimenting with the jetpack's controls - traversing from left to right, slowing down and accelerating. But then she remembers the course she has to follow. As soon as she looks up, trying to line up the two moons and the triangle of Guiding stars, her skis cross and she's flat on her face again.

Gradually Leyah gets the knack of steering the jetpack while following a northerly track until - having fallen over more times than she can remember - she finally feels confident in setting out in earnest. She skis back to where the plane went down and lights a flare. Setting off, when she judges she's covered a few kilometres she lights another flare. And then, further on again, a third. Lining up the pools of light with the moons, as she'd feared, even over this short distance, she's veered off to the east. However, little by little, with some trial and error, she works out how to maintain a reasonably straight path.

Assured that she now has the means to get out of the arctic, for the first time she sees a small, brightly shining light, albeit in the far distance, marking the end of a very long tunnel. But then she can't help thinking, *Aren't there so many things that could go wrong?* Her greatest fear is an unseen crevasse - unable to stop in time, tumbling into it.... And that would be it: gone without a trace.

And so Leyah is still filled with uncertainty as she sets off. But as the hours pass without mishap, and she looks back at the long line of flares behind her, her fears subside. Controlling the jetpack and checking her

route become automatic and her mind starts to drift. And so it's only after she's been travelling half the night that Leyah notices that she's actually in the basin of a huge plain spanning several hundred kilometres in either direction, which is bounded by a ridge of low lying hills. With this realization, Leyah sets herself the goal of reaching the plain's perimeter, where she'll rest during the day and then set off again at nightfall.

Now adept with the jetpack, she accelerates until she's flying over the hard packed ice at fantastic speed. Time too accelerates. When before, with all her doubts and fears, it had dragged, now invigorated by the exercise and the wind in her face, in only a few short hours Leyah reaches the base of the mountain range. She finds it actually much higher than it first looked, rising up several hundred metres.

Slowing down, she starts looking for a route up its steep, rocky incline. But then, without the slightest warning, a snow storm blows up. It's as if someone's thrown a blanket over her head. She can see nothing - barely her hand in front of her face. The mountain range is now as if it never were. For a moment Leyah stands completely still, in shock, wondering what on earth she's going to do.

Then reason takes hold. *Doesn't she only have to follow what she'd planned to do anyway? She's travelled a good distance already - all she has to do is set up camp and see the storm out. Even if it lasts a few days she's in no danger.* But something compels Leyah to keep going, against all sensibility. She's never had a feeling like this before, it's overpowering in its insistence. It's as if her feet would move of their own accord if she doesn't follow them. She wonders if it's no more than an irrational excess of self belief. Of her being, of everyone, the only survivor of the plane crash, and then having managed so far to ski across the ice plain without disaster befalling her. She, who has doubted herself for as long as she can

remember. Is that all it is, then: simply the over confidence of someone who has, for most of her life, only ever seen herself as a victim?

But the feeling will not desist, will not allow her to unpack the tent, light a fire and sink into the sleep she craves. It's like someone persistently – uncomfortably – prodding her in the back. And so, against all logic, she opens the throttle and very slowly begins to advance towards the foot of the hill. After a few minutes she begins to feel the ground beneath her start to rise, gently at first, and then more steeply. Her heart's pounding the whole time but she still allows the strange impulse, an unseen hand, to drive her forward. She closes her mind to all the possible disasters that could befall her.

Though she can see nothing, somehow she manages to avoid crashing into any of rocks strewn at random over the hillside. And then, after an hour of slow, but ultimately uneventful progress, in which she might as well have been blindfolded, she senses the ground leveling off. She quickly kills the engine. The roar of the blizzard, to which she'd been oblivious, so focused was her attention on the blank white ahead of her, now fills her ears. She becomes once again conscious of her aloneness, on this hilltop, the only person in a thousand kilometres. Ten thousand more likely?

At that moment she hears a voice. Though she hears it within her own mind she understands, without knowing how or why, that it's independent of her. It's a calm, masculine voice: "This is your land, you are its Queen. What would you do with it?" The voice is not insistent in its tone, but she still feels compelled to answer. She feels she cannot, should not, ignore it. *Here*, she reflects, *Is it really possible for anything to do more than simply endure, never progressing beyond the most basic existence. Struggle through this day, and against all the odds survive it, only to be confronted with other dangers just as life threatening on the next and the next? If so, what is the point of such a way of life, no more than animal survival?*

The voice replies, as if it has heard her thoughts, "But where you came from, Earth, wasn't it just the same? Nothing of any significant meaning or consequence? And if there ever was something that made man question himself, or challenge the status quo, didn't they run from it? Do anything for the easy, empty life. Never dared to really test themselves. To consciously stare Life in the face and defy it to beat them? Humans became hypnotized by the glitter and flashing lights. Which were no more than ghosts of man's enduring folly."

"For most humans, there was nothing more in the world they inhabited than what you see around you now. The Human Condition was a mirage. Of course a purpose was given them, since they had a strong instinct to find a meaning to life. Though deliberately made devoid of value, it was just sufficient for the minion to trudge happily to their pointless death, their hearts and minds entirely deluded. The ingenuity that went into the folly's creation was truly extraordinary."

It's the strangest thing - at any other time Leyah would have assumed she was going mad, hearing voices in her head. But in this mysterious world where so much unexpected has already happened - to Leyah it appears to lie on the blurred edges between two disparate universes - it seems the most normal thing in the world. And then, having barely had a moment to think about it, just as suddenly as it had appeared, Blizzard departs. No doubt to seek out another corner of Utopia where it would take inexhaustible delight in the creation of mayhem.

Leyah, now able to see clearly, looks about her. In fact, she's still a little bleary, since the voice had a quality that lulled her, to the extent that she'd drifted into that less than conscious state between waking and sleep, when the world is at its safest, and has a warm glow about it. But then she looks behind her, and her heart leaps into her mouth: the tracks of her skis had passed less than a metre from a precipice beyond which is only black. Her

legs shaking, she wonders what other dangers she'd been guided past by the unseen hand of fate.

Preoccupied, her mind still filled with horror images of what might have happened to her, she slowly turns back in the direction she'd been heading. What she sees before her – she can't believe it. She blinks several times; shakes her head. No, it's still there! THIS is no mirage. But hadn't they kept telling her there was no intelligent life forms on the entire peninsula of The Southern Pole? And yet, no more than fifty kilometres away, nestled at the foot of a much larger mountain range, is a small town, visible by the lights in each dwelling, and around a large open space at its centre.

Leyah's immediate instinct is to open the throttle and make for the settlement as fast as she can. But what lies before her stops her in her tracks. While behind her the mountain's summit follows a gentle fall from its peak, a few metres ahead of her the ground drops away almost vertically. Though, with shadows from the rock outcrops casting confusing distortions of light and dark, it's actually difficult to distinguish the lie of the terrain with any accuracy at all. But she has no choice if she wants to reach the settlement. After scanning the ridge in both directions Leyah selects a section to traverse down which appears the most generous, in other words might be the least likely to cause her to break her neck before she'd got five metres down it.

Having tied the swag to her front she sits down on the skis and, using the reverse thrust of the jet pack, begins a cautious descent down the cliff. With the lights playing its tricks on her, in fact she's picked one of the most treacherous sections of the escarpment. So steep is the descent that within seconds Leyah is hurtling down the slope. She's still only half way down when the skis smack into a rock, sending her cartwheeling down the mountain. She only comes to a stop at a short section, slightly flatter than the rest, where she's thrown into a deep snow drift.

Dragging herself out of it, though thoroughly terrified she refuses to let herself think beyond getting down the mountain. Stuck half way up what now looks like an almost sheer cliff face, what else can she do? Setting down on her skis again, heart in mouth, she nervously pushes off. Even though she again has the jet pack on full reverse thrust, the slope is so steep it seems to make no difference, and again within seconds she's out of control.... Sharp toothed rocks that would rip her to pieces flash past, barely millimeters from her face. And then she's literally airborne, having been catapulted by the momentum of the swag off the lip of a rock. She holds her breath, waiting for the crunch of broken bones. But once again fortune is at her side and instead she lands on a patch of loose snow somewhere near the foot of the escarpment.

Pride and body a little bruised, but by some miracle otherwise intact, she manages to extricate herself from the deep snowdrift and gets gingerly to her feet. Shaking herself down, she first goes looking for, and after a few minutes finds, her skis which, another miracle, are unbroken. And then, fingers crossed, she presses the starter on the now slightly dented jet pack, which is still secured to her back. Thankfully, again it kicks over immediately, then settles into a steady, reassuring purr. Leyah takes a final look back up the mountain. From where she's standing it looks horrifying – a literal sheer drop. How did she make it? When once she might have been stuck in a paralysis of fear, now she merely shrugs and in an instant the ordeal is forgotten.

Instead, she's reminded of something her father had once told her, "It's like when you're in the ring, with someone who's only intention is to knock you out. A situation like that demands your full attention." *Yes, only by being fully in the present have I any chance of surviving this.* "If you dwell on what you coulda, shoulda done, you'll be finished off. A punch gets through to your head, or worse. And with that, you're down on the mat, defenceless."

Laughing ruefully, ahead of her she imagines a constant stream of life threatening possibilities to contend with. *I can't afford to have half a mind on the past. Someone or some force saved me; it makes no sense, but it happened. No time for turning it over and over looking for answers - more than likely I'll find none anyway.*

Now having no need of the guide of the Destiny Star and the two moons, for her horizon is a closer one, Leyah makes rapid progress. And so it is that before long the dimly twinkling lights of the town, from a general luminosity, separate into the lights on individual dwellings. Street lamps shine hazy arcs down upon the narrow pathways formed between the simply constructed, rustic houses. Leyah notices that, in fact, the town is not as big as it first appeared. Is perhaps no more than two kilometres across. It's made up of four rows of houses forming a kind of corral with, in its centre, a clear space. Around its edge are open sided buildings with wide overhanging roofs.

Still a kilometre from the village, something cautions her to stop, but the craving for living company, of whatever sort, is too strong, and so she continues. A few minutes later she's standing in the middle of the corral, surrounded by the stone and timber dwellings. The wind and dark night sky had camouflaged her arrival, allowing her to approach this blot of existence unnoticed. But before a few minutes have passed, as she stands under the powerful street lights, she finds herself the attention of a large group of people that have emerged, in ones and twos, from their homes.

The feeling of being on a brightly lit stage in front of a less than friendly audience is an overpowering one, making Leyah regret her impulsive decision to enter the village. Contemplating escape she looks over her shoulder, but finds herself surrounded. The crowd remains eerily silent as they slowly close in on her. What chance there might have been to get away

has now gone. As the villagers get nearer their numbers increase - the wall of presence thickens - until it seems the whole town must be out.

And then a low hum begins, which sends a chill down her back, which gradually shapens into a song. The melody has an eerie quality, reflective of a strong, ululating wind. At any other time Leyah might have been captured by it, but now it hints of menace. There's a collective power about the townsfolk which makes her sharply aware of her vulnerability. In fact, of being at their complete mercy. Her recently discovered confidence evaporates; her legs begin to shake, and she feels liquid trickling down the inside of her thighs.

Staring wildly at the faces of the encroaching crowd, now barely fifty metres from her, a low moan escapes her, which some pick up, spurring them forward. But then, when only twenty metres separates them, the entire crowd stops. Leyah notices many of them turning to look in the direction of a single dwelling set slightly forward from those about it. Of similar design to the rest, comprising stone wall construction, with windows, doors, and the roof made of timber, however it is by far the most impressive. Noticeably larger, it's made up of four such structures joined by covered pathways.

The children in the crowd, having by now mostly lost interest in Leyah, have begun playing amongst themselves, only occasionally pointing in her direction and giving a covered hand laugh. None of the adults appear to have the courage to approach her, and an uneasy silence settles over the tableau: a single woman in the centre of a circled crowd of two thousand. She looks at them, at first in complete terror, imagining they're about to attack her and rip her to shreds, but with each passing minute, and no movement on their part, her nerves settle a little.

They, mute, and with intense curiosity writ clear on their faces, simply stare at her, in some kind of wonder. *Where has she come from? What is she*

doing here? Who can ever recall the presence of an uninvited stranger? Of course, prisoners have frequently been brought back for sacrifice, but this? Is she alone? Perhaps she's the vanguard of a hoard about to attack? But, no, she appears to be alone. What then? Such comments pass between the villagers. Leyah, meanwhile, is reflecting on her actions: in her desperation for company, she'd given not the slightest consideration to the possibility of danger. It takes a few minutes more for her to notice that whilst she's wrapped in several thick layers, these people wear only the flimsiest of covering. Some are even naked from the waist down - they appear immune to the cold.

The silence is becoming palpable, but for Leyah, at least in this stalemate is safety. The Snow People appear unwilling to come closer, restrained by some invisible hand. *But what are they waiting for?* Because that is how it seems. *Or more specifically, because they keep looking to the large house, WHO are they waiting for?* And then it's main door is flung open. Before she can see him, she hears a voice boom out, "What the fuck is all this noise. Don't you know it's my wedding night? How am I supposed to split my bride with this prattling going on outside my sleeping chamber? And what are all these children doing up?" The crowd take several backward steps, allowing Leyah to get a glimpse of who she assumes is the leader of The Snow People, as he emerges from his house.

The villagers cower before him, "Get the fuck out of here, all of you. Or..." And then there he is: a huge figure spotlighted under one of the lamps. He takes a few paces towards Leyah, then stops. At any other time the sight of this huge bear of a man staring pop eyed at her with his jaw almost to his chin might have made Leyah burst out laughing. But she's seen the look he has in his eyes once before; many years before. And she knows immediately what's in store for her. The King is a Goliath of a man. Long, greasy blond hair conceals most of his face. Bearded, with a body matted with hair, to

Leyah he has more the look of an animal: virile, dangerous, unpredictable. He terrifies her.

The King is completely naked, and his penis is gigantically erect, making it impossible to ignore. But he appears oblivious, and continues to stare at Leyah, for what feels like an eternity. At the sight of the brutal man, and his clear intent, Leyah senses the familiar feeling of being victim to a fate beyond her control. In fact at this instant she feels not even human at all, more a piece of meat, prey about to be devoured by a supremely powerful beast. It's a feeling she's had so many times in the past she's lost count.

The Chief lets out an animal roar. Then advances with giant strides towards Leyah. The ice shudders beneath her with each monster step. Now upon her, he grabs her by the arm, almost crushing it. Her instinct is to scream out but something stops her – some residue of her new discovered courage. She won't allow him to see her fear! She bites her lip, until she can taste the blood. And then she feels herself tossed like a rag doll over his shoulder, before he turns on his heels and storms back inside his house.

Through the night, and to the early hours of the breaking dawn, for the second time in her life Leyah experiences the degradation of a man treating her as an object to his satisfaction. Not a being his equal, with her own thoughts, feelings and desires. Leyah loses count of the number of times he mounts her, until finally she falls unconscious: a part of her mind takes control, to shut out what's being done to her body.

Slave

In the morning Leyah wakes to find herself alone. Unable to move for the unbearable pain inside her, tears of self pity well, and she gives a silent moan. But then, as she recalls how the King had abused her – she nothing more than a toy for his gratification – the flood gates open. It seems to her that, wherever she turns she cannot escape being the slave of another. Unable to determine her own fate because someone stronger, physically or mentally, is dictating it to her. Like a movie the night plays itself through. Only to begin again – so that when the Chief enters the room he finds her in a fetal ball, her body heaving, wailing like a lost child. She is completely oblivious to his presence. He stands huge, silhouetted in the doorway. Behind him stand several women of the tribe. "Get her cleaned up, the ceremony will take place this evening."

Leyah is half dragged, half carried to a hut from which emanates a steady chatter of women's voices, laughing and joking about the previous night's events, including Leyah's rape by the Chief. Incredulous, Leyah listens to the conversation, "Did you see him, he couldn't stop himself? ...Wasn't he enormous? I wonder what it would have been like?He'd kill you wouldn't he, with that thing? ...My husband is nowhere near as big..." The women's conversation is repeatedly punctured by peals of laughter as it continues in similar vein.

Leyah is seated in the middle of a large group of women busy with making up her face and dressing her hair in an elaborate style. Another women paints delicate patterns with something like henna on her naked arms and legs. Leyah has been dressed in only light clothing, but she's warmed by a fire burning steadily in the centre of the hut: the smoke billows around the room, escaping only through cracks in the walls and out the open

windows. Completely ignored, as if she were nothing more than a fancy doll, Leyah has time to reflect how primitive the life of The Snow People is, though how perfectly attuned it is to their environment.

Still a little chilled herself, Leyah notices that most of the women are sweating profusely even though by now most have removed their clothes and sit quite naked. From time to time a man would drag one of them unceremoniously from the hut: they never complain, in fact for most it's an opportunity to crack a joke, or pass a meaningful look. Some let out a scream, and cry protestation, but to Leyah it appears feigned, and the knowing smiles of the remaining women confirm her suspicions.

After what seems an eternity the preparations are complete (*For what?* Leyah keeps asking herself) and she's allowed to leave the hut, this time without any kind of escort. Before venturing outside Leyah makes sure she has on plenty of layers – since to her the clothes of the Snow People appear wafer thin and provide the least protection against the biting arctic wind. She steps out into a bright, midday sun. But Leyah's taken only a few steps before, blinded by the light reflecting off the brilliant whiteness of the snow, she stumbles and falls to her knees. At that moment, after all her troubles, which appear to only escalate with every passing hour, the effort to stand is beyond her. Her shoulders slump, and once again she begins to cry, a pitiful figure to all that pass by, who stare momentarily at her before carrying on their way.

After a few minutes a woman rushes up, one of those that had been making her up, and begins beating Leyah about the back, and screaming, "Stop blubbering bitch. You should be grateful he wants you.... And stop your fucking crying! Look what you're doing to your face – we're going to have to do it again!"

Leyah finds herself dragged to her feet, and back into the hut where her makeup is repaired. After they've finished with her she's frog marched out of

the hut and towards the centre of the corral, where a large throne carved out of ice has been placed. A few minutes later the King appears. With thick fur pelts thrown over it, he then slumps himself down. Once again he is naked, and appears completely oblivious to the biting wind and sub zero temperatures. His penis stands as ever erect, glistening and throbbing, its head purple and engorged, with a thick vein running along its length.

As Leyah is forced to approach the throne The King rises to his full height. A number of woman standing nearby can be heard to gasp, whilst others sigh. It sounds to Leyah as though they would do anything to be in her place, and more than willingly give themselves up to this beast, and in whatever manner he chose to take them. She looks down, trying to blot the image of the King from her mind but one of the women at her side pulls her hair back, forcing her to look directly at the man, who only hours before had repeatedly raped her. Now, standing before his throne, he arrogantly thrusts his hips forward as if inviting her to suck him.

Trying to look anywhere but directly at him, for the first time Leyah notices a thick pole planted in the ice, and tied to it are two large dogs standing huddled together, whining softly. Something in their manner, the way they interact with each other, reminds her of a time long ago, of an episode she's spent most of her life willing herself to forget. And one which only last night had forced itself back into her conscious. A recollection of a time in the distant past on Earth. When those false walls that gave us the illusion of polite society were for Leyah swept aside by the same act - committed by a man against her simply because he could. Because he had the strength and the opportunity to do so.

With several hundred years now passed since its demise, it's now so easy to see the delusion that was human society on Earth. One in which a multitude of men as human beasts - when Leyah now looks back to that time she actually pictures them as wild, predator animals - were allowed to

room free among us. Because we were unaware they were NOT human, since they looked and dressed the same as the rest of us. And generally acted the same, except at those times they let the beast out. Were in fact adept at conforming as it served their persistent aim - to manipulate, dominate, control. The reality that was life on Earth is now starkly clear to Leyah. It was one in which Evil dominated.

For herself, in those times, she'd felt that she was somehow less than everyone else. On occasions too numerous to recall, she'd actually felt herself less than human. A thing of so little value that her existence was of no consequence to The Universe. She'd often thought, *Would it in fact have been better if I'd never been born?*

But, by necessity, once we reach the bottom, thereafter our trajectory can only be an upward one. Back then on Earth, in Leyah's case it was the stripping of all pretences, since anything less had become so ludicrously implausible. In the eyes of people she sought respect from, she accepted they placed little or no value in her opinion. Those whom she loved would never love her, and people with power, if they noticed her at all, would only use her. Such was the reality of her existence on Earth.

Was it months or years she'd teetered with the idea of ending her life? But she could not and, later, would not. Though still feeling less than useless, one day she'd observed herself climbing out of the pit. She can no longer recall the event which triggered it (except that it was quite trivial), only the feeling. That, from that day on she'd had a complete disregard for what other people thought of her. They could hate her, ridicule her, have absolutely no opinion about her at all. She didn't care what they thought of what she said, what she looked like, or whichever box they'd categorized her into. The climb was still on but at last she'd felt she belonged in society. She felt deserving of an existence, however insignificant it might be. But with the rape by this ogre before her now - unrepentant, glorying in his dominance

over her - she feels herself being thrust back down to the base of the pit. And now it seems it might be bottomless. And if that is the case then she might as well end it. Here, today.

A series of screamed commands from an old hag standing at The Chief's side returns Leyah to the present, to find herself still staring into the faces of the dogs. Perhaps because of this they take notice of her, and the eyes of one of the dogs meets hers, and there's a moment of recognition between them. Leyah steps back, and lets out a groan. She's never forgotten those eyes. She looks again: *No, there can be no doubt.* And as if in confirmation the dog gives a slight nod of its head. Leyah quickly looks away.

Once again Leyah hears the Song of the Wind, its drawn out melody bringing goose bumps to her arms. She observes that large, fur lined mats have been laid out in front of all the huts on the edge of the corral, and villagers are now jostling for place on them. The thunder of huge fire crackers being let off, showering stars into the falling night sky, adds a festive air. Hundreds of children are running around, screaming, hurling themselves at each other, tumbling on the ice, and pelting each other with snowballs. In one area Leyah sees some of the men engaged in games of strength and speed: fighting each other, or clinging for dear life onto the bodies of Great White Bears, that are maddened by their short chained imprisonment. One man, with a swipe of a paw has his head ripped clean off: a roar of approval goes up as his life blood fountains out, washing the snow in a broad splash of red. Others on skates career, barely millimetres away from the spectators, around a track marked out along the perimeter of the corral. In every race a party is scattered by a racer losing their footing or through being pushed off the track by a competitor. Later, Leyah hears, the bravest of the men will compete in a long distance race up the mountain, dragged by White Bears trained for the purpose.

The festivities go late into the night, but at no time does the King speak to Leyah. In fact barely does he take any notice of her at all except from time to time to prod or squeeze her like a toy. She'd been instructed to sit on a mat at his feet, and is surrounded by a group of the most attractive women of the tribe. As the evening wears on the men become drunk, causing the fights, seen everywhere around the corral, to become less violent and more comical. And the races to veer to the more hazardous for the spectators: the competitors spend more time sliding off the track than progressing along it. Time and again the razor sharp blades slice into soft flesh, and the more life threatening the injury, the greater the roar of approval from the crowd. It occurs to Leyah that The Snow People place an undue reverence on violence, injury, and death. The gentler emotions of love and compassion appear anathema to them.

The contrast between the young maidens' chattering excitement at the opportunity to get close to their Chief, and Leyah's clear look of dejection doesn't go unnoticed by the King. He calls over the old hag and begins whispering in her ear. The woman nods, occasionally glancing at Leyah. After a few minutes the King waves the old woman away, and she sidles over to where Leyah is seated. On her approach the girls immediately become silent. They make space for her whilst showing extreme respect - though for some, Leyah notices, a degree of fear and wariness appears the dominant expression.

The hag, in a venomous tone, tells Leyah, "The King has paid you the supreme compliment of taking you as one of his wives. Every woman dreams of this privilege, and yet you appear dissatisfied. The King advises you that he grows weary of this display and, despite his desire to acquire you, he will not suffer to look upon your face if your expression remains as it is. Instead you will become the slave of every man, and perhaps then you

would appreciate the good fortune you might have experienced as his concubine."

Leyah, through the experience of childhood, became adept at a skill few can fully master. Even at her most dejected she could appear the life of whichever party was the best in town that night. Laugh while inside she was falling apart, or humor the most ignorant boor until they were convinced of her infatuation. She'd learned this to avoid her mother's look of condescension and stinging rebukes which could always cut her: a thin knife slid between the ribs which penetrated to her very soul. Only later did she learn that her mother, who always attracted the centre of attention and gave the appearance of its enjoyment, was in fact completely indifferent to the adulation of men and, for that matter, the jealousy of women. In fact, was indifferent to life: nothing moved her to joy, or drove her in desperation to hold on to something she craved. For nothing ever could move her. Whatever the circumstances she always maintained a calm, cold apathy.

And so it is that with practiced ease Leyah turns her most radiant smile in the King's direction, who in response goes so far as to rest a hoary hand upon her knee, and squeeze it almost to breaking. Leyah notices a look in his eye. It gives her hope, and for the first time she contemplates the possibility of escape. She rests her head against his leg, the King reacts by letting out a low grunt, and for the first time she sees him smile. It's clear to all the women present that he's besotted with Leyah, this woman not of their tribe. The daggers of jealousy are immediately drawn. As all of us are capable, Leyah is immediately aware of these shifts of emotion, though she reveals nothing.

Towering bonfires are lit, and food is consumed in a Rabelaisian gluttony. With full bellies and even more drink inside the revelers, the party takes on a more frivolous mood. But never far below the surface there's the inevitability of violence - from a misspoken word, through envy, or the

surfacing of a long smoldering feud. Between the young men the contests become more dangerous, until latterly weapons are drawn and they take to each other with uncontrolled fury. They fight in complete silence, but the women egging them on scream for one to slay the other - from the look on their faces, with a thrill bordering on orgasmic. In an attempt to provide incitement, they rip clothes from their bodies and proffer themselves to one or other of the combatants. At the sight of the violence and deprivation the Chief throws back his head and laughs, a great booming sound devoid of all warmth, that makes Leyah jump out of her skin. However she has the wherewithal to maintain the painted on smile and the King continues to look upon her with satisfaction, and apparent approval.

Several hours later, now well into the early hours, The King casts Leyah aside and jumps up onto the ice throne. "You are men, and you are women," he begins, pointing a finger and sweeping a great arc which encompasses all his people, and all else that is his.

At the sound of The King's voice there's an immediate cessation of all activity. Even when the moment before several of the fighters had been on the point of killing their opponent, and the women been screaming demonic encouragement, on hearing his voice the reaction is instantaneous. This because absolute obedience, on pain of death, has been inculcated on every member of the tribe since birth. All of them, times over, have seen someone who'd been foolish enough to question his godlike rule over them - had heard their screams for the torture to end, and to be put out of their misery.

"We won this land by defeating every one of our enemies, again and again, until we either destroyed them or they no longer had fight left in them. We were stronger, and more prepared to sacrifice everything for victory." A loud, drunken cheer goes around the corral, "You are their sons and daughters. Make yourself worthy of them. Tonight, as I will with this woman, make me warriors, a credit to our tribe, that all men will fear. So that one day

they, our children, will seek out new enemies, and make either glorious victory, or share even greater glory in a warrior's death. They who will be remembered, and talked of, by their brother warriors for all time."

Another yell of approval, this one louder than the last. It echoes back, and gains in strength as the men, with animal roar, fall upon each other with ever greater ferocity. To a bleary eyed Leyah there seems to be blood everywhere, and on everyone. As the fighting between the men reaches a climax, having formed circles around each pair of fighters, the women strip naked, throw themselves onto the snow and, legs spread wide, begin writhing, clutching a breast with one hand, and with the other fingering themselves.

The King, laughing, jumps down from his throne, grabs Leyah by the hair and drags her across the snow to his palace. Once inside he throws her onto the same pile of rugs he'd raped her on the previous night. With a huge paw he slams the door shut, in the process almost ripping it off its hinges. Leyah braces herself, trying to blank her mind to the agony she's to endure once again. He stands over her, vast, an outline of half man half beast, his penis swinging pendulously from side to side, its glistening head reaches above his belly. And beneath his balls hang, a sac that would take her two hands to grasp around.

He roars a terrifying animal snarl. But then, against all expectation, he first staggers, clutches at the wall, and then crashes face down on the rug. An arm, the thickness of a man's leg, smashes across her chest and pins her to the bed. With Leyah still trying to take in what's happened, before she's even thought what she should do, a small side door opens which she's never noticed before. Through it emerges the old hag accompanied by another woman, young and beautiful, who wears a terrified expression on her face. Leyah doesn't recognise her, but the young woman is in fact the King's most

recently acquired wife - the one he'd married on the day Leyah had arrived in The Snow Dwellers' village.

The old woman looks coldly at Leyah, "Get up whore! And stop your whining - he's not going to wake for hours. I've made sure of that." Her eyes blaze. "He is not for you. And if you ever come back here I will kill you.... Your things are outside. What are you waiting for!" Leyah stares blankly up at the old crone, not moving. With unexpected strength, she pulls Leyah out from under the King's arm, and then pushes her through the small doorway. And through another, which opens onto a clearing at the back of the house, where it's quite dark and appears deserted. The hag points to Leyah's meagre possessions, "They're all there.... Now leave - before I call the guards on you."

"Wait! Get me the dogs. I'm not leaving without the sacrifice dogs." The young woman at the hag's side looks incredulously at Leyah, but signals to her to do Leyah's bidding.

Escape

Finding she's lost none of her skills at power skiing, and afraid that the Hag might try to double cross her, Leyah pushes herself to the limits of her endurance. Within an hour she's forged considerable distance between herself and the village, almost reaching the mountain range.

When she eventually stops and allows herself to look over her shoulder, she can still see the great fire towers, their flames reaching high into the sky. She assumes the men must still be fighting and the women cavorting for their attention, but she can no longer distinguish them, though it occurs to her, *Did they actually exist as separate beings? Weren't they really all part of a great beast, the king its head, the men its arms and legs and the women its loins?* Thenceforth, it would be how she would always think of the Snow People.

Unlike when she'd entered their settlement, on leaving it Leyah is not alone. Freed from a certain death as a sacrifice to celebrate Leyah's wedding to the Chief, the dogs stand close at her side. They too stare morosely back at the only sign of life that exists on this most bleak and inhospitable island. As she turns away, her heart still somewhere in her mouth, the terror not yet completely subsided, the dogs give a low growl and leap at something behind her. She turns, instinctively raising her hands to protect herself. Expecting to be confronted by the King's guards, the Hag having betrayed her, instead she faces an even more terrifying threat.

Not more than three metres from her stands a Great White Bear, which towers over her. It's already dispatched the dogs, which now lie inert in the snow, their bodies shredded by its claws. Alone, defenceless before the great beast, Leyah wants to scream for mercy but no sound comes out. But then hope surges. *Still with skis and jetpack on, couldn't I outrun it?* She

opens the throttle of the jetpack, but in her panic twists too hard. Instead of weaving around the bear she skids, loses control and runs straight into the gigantic arms of The Bear.

Finally the scream escapes her, a high pitched desperate shriek, which is entirely muffled by the bear's thick fur, as it draws her in, its great arms enveloping her. Having only just escaped the Hordes, and to now face almost certain death, the familiar despairing cry screams at her, *Why am I always the victim of my life? Always to be pushed, pulled, crushed. Never choosing my own path.*

Despite its powerful grip on her, Leyah manages to twist her head around, wanting in what she's certain is the last moment to see the two dogs. She thinks of them now as friends - though, oh, for how long had she despised them. And wished upon them the most grisly, painful deaths in revenge for the suffering they'd inflicted on her when they were men. Both having raped her when she'd tried to rescue a young Somali boy, Anil, from the murderous hands of a doctor.

A deep voice interrupts her scrambled thoughts. "Don't be afraid, we are all friends here.... Yes, you know them already. It was them that once raped you, but in the Snow Dweller's village you saved them from their karma with your love." Leyah looks up into the face of The Great White Bear, so huge it completely fills her vision. Its voice holds the beast's roar, but she detects a kindness in its tone that quells all fear. Instead a warmth rises in her breast, and when she looks into its eyes there's another moment of immediate recognition. She cries out, "No, it can't be you!I never thought I'd see you again, Anil. How many times I wanted, even if only for a moment, the chance to speak to you. To apologize for my stupid arrogance, thinking I had all the answers. When in fact it was me that had the least idea. Was the most ignorant of the situation.... I always wanted to see you, to ask for your forgiveness."

She buries her face deep in the thick white fur. Though it smells revolting, of damp, of rank fish, and things she can't even put a name to, she doesn't care. At that moment it's the sweetest scent she's ever known. A boy had once trusted her with his life, and she'd failed him. Now she could lift that weight from her heart, along with the ignominy of her rape by the two men that had also helped kill the little boy. Dogs now in this incarnation, they lie motionless, their existence snuffed out by a single swipe from the huge paw of the bear that is now Anil, who was once their victim. She wonders, *How life is constructed of so many circles, constantly forming and closing, that bind us together. We are all tied to one another by so many threads. No one is a stranger: we all share the deepest intimacy, not least of death itself, as victim or assassin.* The thought surprises her: her mind has never turned in this way before.

Anil speaks again. "I am not here about that, Leyah. We all have a profound life purpose. Our journey is to discover that purpose, and then to live it. You have embarked on the Great Journey. It will take you, if you reach its end, to the highest level of human existence, to where few of your species have ever scaled.... You must follow the polar stars, and they will lead you to a man who will instruct you." Anil describes in detail the man she must seek out. To Leyah he sounds the very ideal of manhood. In her heart, even without the opportunity to achieve her destiny, to claim all the power of The Universe, she would have wanted to meet him. "I must head north, but where will I find him? How far must I travel. For how long?"

Anil shakes his huge shaggy head, "Not the North, he is waiting for you at the Southern Pole. Have the Northern Stars at your back, and they will guide you to him. Don't worry about your friends, they will soon recover and together you can be on your journey.... You must pass through the village of The Snow People, but on this occasion they will not see you. Take care of your friends, Leyah."

He waves a giant fist in the direction of the dogs, who appear to be coming to, shaking their heads blearily as if from a deep sleep. Seeing The Great Bear standing close to Leyah they begin barking frantically, but she puts a hand on Anil's chest and they realise, understanding everything in an instant. Without fear they come up to the bear, pressing themselves against his leg, whilst Leyah remains in his arms, feeling as safe as she's ever felt in her life.

Some time later, after bidding Anil a long farewell, the three travellers pass through the corral - though not without some trepidation, despite Anil's promise of being invisible to the Snow Dwellers. Dead and terribly maimed bodies lie strewn, as if a great battle has just been fought. Alongside them, the writhing twin backs of the victorious warriors fucking to oblivion their women. Feeding them the seed of the next generation of this tribe caught in the same slaughter ritual that so engaged human civilization. But, in fact, for them there is no longer an enemy for them to defeat, or defend against. Their enemy is only themselves. The scene that Leyah passes through, as dawn begins its break, is all testament one might need to understand how lost is their cause. How lost, in fact, the cause of Violence ALWAYS is.

This tribe is an anachronism, propelled into a future without direction or any meaning relevant to the culture, values and abilities that define them. They are following a star that died millennia before. They need to find a new one. But their leader lacks wisdom, and the humility to admit the error so obvious. And he will cut down anyone that illuminates the failure he persists with, and so there is no hope for them. "They will continue to follow the wrong star, as so many do. We must be certain ours is the true one for us. Question, take nothing for granted or on face value, until you are certain it is the one." It was the last thing Anil had said to Leyah.

The three friends have been travelling for nearly a week. They are well provisioned: unknowingly, the old hag had provided them with more than sufficient to reach The Great Southern Pole. Every night, as soon as the three stars appear and line up with the moons, with a heart lighter than she can recall having ever felt before, Leyah has pushed herself and the dogs to their limit of endurance.

This morning Leyah has been unexpectedly woken by a delicious aroma of food. At first she thought she was dreaming, but as she opens her eyes she hears it sizzling and popping on a fire. Images of a thick steak and fresh cut vegetables fill her mind. She jumps up, startling the dogs who, in the narrow confines of the tent, sprawl across her every night. Opening the flap she looks out and, not more than fifty metres from her, stands a frame with a roaring fire beneath it. Upon it, just as she'd imagined, are four of the juiciest steaks you could imagine. To one side of the grill, on a low table, are four plates each piled high with vegetables. Beside two of the plates are large mugs of steaming black coffee, their rich aroma mixing enticingly with that of the food.

Someone is here?Yes, you idiot, of course there must be someone here! Leyah laughs to herself. *But where - and how come we didn't see them last night?* She looks in all directions and then calls the dogs out to help her search. But there's no one in sight. The plain is just as empty as it's always been. *Except there's a fucking barbeque picnic been set up bang outside the tent!* At that moment Leyah is aware of an intense pressure lifting. One which had been pressing upon her ever since their escape from The Snow People. A fear of the Emptiness Unbounded through which they've been journeying. And of the ever changing uncertainties they face with each new day. Not least, the distance remaining to their goal, and whether their provisions would last them to it. At times she'd even doubted their purpose for going to The Pole.

But with this sight, incongruous yet so familiar – creating such a sense of domestication in this terrifying, inhospitable landscape – the moment she'd seen it, the burden had been lifted. It seems to infect the dogs too. They become like carefree children, chasing each other in a mad game of tag. Until someone's caught, then dragging them down into the loose snow and piling on top of them. Laughing and screaming into the wind's face, feeling it as something living. When exhausted the three of them drop to the ground and lie on their backs looking up at the empty sky. For Leyah all fears, all concerns, leave her.

Hunger hits them at the same time: they can think of nothing but the food still sizzling invitingly on the barbeque. They look at one another, for an instant not moving, then as one they jump up and rush towards the fire. But after only a few strides they come to a screeching halt. Because, at that moment a man's head appears out of the ice. As they continue to stare, frozen in disbelief, he climbs out of the hole.

After drying and dressing himself, he throws five fish on to the grill. At no point does he turn and look in their direction. But it's not just that he's appeared in the vast wilderness as if out of nowhere that has struck them as stone. It's also that he's the exact image of the man The Great White Bear had told them would present Leyah with The Power of The Universe.

At the sight of him, inside Leyah is giggling like a love struck schoolgirl, but she manages to contain herself sufficiently to raise an arm, wave and call out to him. But the wind is blowing in their direction and he still has his back half turned; he seems not to hear. Leyah, followed at a cautious distance by the two dogs, starts walking towards the man. It's not until they're almost upon him that he notices them.

Looking up from the fire, he smiles warmly first at Leyah and then at the two dogs. Leyah's heart melts and her legs feel like jelly, but she manages to maintain a semblance of composure. Or she at least hopes she does. "Ah,

sleepy heads, you must have had a long night's travel to sleep so late.... I noticed you didn't have anything to eat so I thought I'd surprise you. Please, all of you, join me. There's a place for everyone." Although he invites the dogs to join, Leyah senses his attention more focused on her, which makes her heart beat faster. Images that make her smile to herself start to play a movie through her head.

The dogs, needing no further invitation, and having no interest in Leyah's budding romance, begin fighting over a piece of steak, each grabbing an end of it. As they both pull, trying to tear it from the other's mouth, instead of breaking it begins to stretch. As it doubles in size, on seeing this the two dogs give a frightened yelp, drop the meat in the snow and start backing up, growling at it. The man laughs, slapping his thigh, "Don't worry. It's not going to bite you. Eat as much as you want, it will never run out."

Tentatively at first, each dog collects another steak from one of the plates, then trots a few metres away and begins to slowly eat the succulent meat. Sure enough, as they hold it down with one paw, and pull chunks off with their teeth, it expands. After a few moments one of them lets out a long howl of delight, and the other joins in. Leyah and the man laugh and then turn to look at one another. At the same moment the laughter dies on their lips. The man coughs; Leyah looks down, her cheeks burning.

Still stood by the barbeque, the man gives Leyah a slight bow and gestures for her to take a seat at the picnic. It's an idyllic morning. The sun is shining, a few clouds skit across an otherwise clear blue sky, and the wind has now dropped to a gentle breeze. It seems even that there's a warmth in the air, as of a spring day. Or better still, a late summer, the last remnants of it.

Already the dogs have gorged themselves to excess. Whining, after informing Leyah they will be going nowhere for some time, they return to the tent. Here they curl themselves up into a ball and instantly fall into a deep

sleep, punctuated only by the occasional snore, and a yelp or kick of the legs as they relive some adventure from the past. It brings a smile to the faces of the man and woman sat at the dining table, who are engaged in an easy flowing conversation. Leyah has only picked at her food. Isn't it so that when the heart is full, the belly has no room for food? They talk for hours, on every imaginable topic. He compliments her, not on her looks, though it's clear he's attracted to her, but for her wisdom and humor, and her courage. Attributes, he tells her, that he admires in a woman more than a pretty face and nicely turned ankle.

After several hours Leyah senses the end of the day approaching – there's a chill in the air, and a faint darkening of the sky. She wants him to ask her, because she would say yes. She wants him to do all of the things the brute of a King had done to her. Because with this man it would be different. Not least because it would be her choice – more, her fervent desire. And at this moment she can think of nothing else but him, inside her. He so kind, so wise, and of course so handsome: gentle but in a masculine way. Not like those boys from her youth that had made you wonder what they were, or wanted to be.

"I suppose we should pack up and get some rest before we leave. Will you join me, darling?" An open question, but a clear invitation. Then again, what else are a man and woman in love supposed to do? She takes his hand and leads him to her tent. Bending down, she unzips the tent flap. Behind her she hears him say, "I have enjoyed today, it reminds me of a past.... Almost forgotten it actually. It's a pity such days have to end. But then again, if they didn't they wouldn't be so special, would they? By the way, my name is Balthazar."

Leyah's immediate thought is, *Oh, what a nice name! Unusual, exotic even.* But something in his tone makes Leyah hesitate as she's about to step into the tent. She feels the grip on her hand tighten. He says something

innocuous; immediately she recognises the voice. She doesn't want to turn around, knowing what she'll see. The pain in her heart is unbearable: it will mean everything she'd felt, all her hopes, were for something that never was. She wants, for a few moments more, to prolong the fantasy: of a perfect day, with a perfect man that loves her for who she is. Not just for her appearance - as all the boys she'd ever known had done. Even as she feels her heart break she can't help a rueful laugh: *What's so fucking great about what's inside my pants!*

Slowly she turns around and there before her, as she'd expected, is the old hag, head thrown back, a cackle of laughter exploding from her toothless mouth. For an instant hope leaps to her breast. *Surely she and the dogs can overcome this decrepit old witch?* But when she looks inside the tent she finds the dogs already gone - just a pile of dried bones left. Thinking quickly: *Still! If I get inside the tent, fire up the jetpack, I could cut my way out and then ski out of here. She'd never catch me!* She tries to drag her hand away, pulling with all her strength. And she does manage to free herself, then dashes into the tent and tries frantically to close it behind her.

The cold voice of the hag rings out. "You're wasting both our times." As Leyah straps on the jetpack the tent bursts into flames, before flying off on the wind that's suddenly whipped up. In the open now it seems all she has to do is start the engine and she's free, but when she presses the starter the engine only splutters and then dies.

Deja Vu

Leyah awakes to the pounding of The Chief against her body, and a deep, throbbing ache inside her. She screams out but he takes no notice - a machine, grunting, snorting. She wonders, *Has she, will she, ever in a lifetime experience this too? Absolute power over another beings.... Would she ever kill someone?* She feels certain she never has in the past.

When the king climaxes for the last time, he again ejaculates over Leyah. Her upper body and face are covered in his semen. He stands over her, his penis now flaccid. Drops of semen fall on to her breasts. Without a word to her, King looks down at Leyah, grunts, smiles as if pleased with himself, and then leaves, slamming the door behind him. Outside, she hears him yell something unintelligible, and immediately people start running, shouting orders. Desperate to clean herself of him, she tries to get up, but she finds her limbs are tied by thin ropes to the corners of the bed. Despite all her efforts she's unable to free herself, only managing to rub her wrists painfully raw.

Several hours later Leyah is released from the prison cell where the king had raped her for the second time. She's then dragged to a large building on the far side of the corral, directly opposite the King's residence. Once inside Leyah notices that, unlike the other buildings, the floor is covered with timber, into which has been carved crude depictions of war. At the far end of the chamber is the King, reclining languidly on a high throne, loose clothing covering only his upper body. His erect manhood as usual is fully exposed. Filling the entire wall behind him is an extraordinary portrait, of this man, but not him: she assumes correctly that it's a forebear, of almost identical likeness.

The painting is of a naked man, his penis rampant, towering over a beautiful young woman tied exactly as Leyah had been shackled only hours before. Around the girl are the bodies of soldiers slain by the giant, their deaths depicted in gory detail and with the most vivid color. It occurs to Leyah that in this vast expanse, empty of all color., this red is the only contrast to the otherwise universal white. Which includes the thick furs hacked from the carcasses of Great White bears, that lie strewn along the edges of the Hall, and around the King's throne. Except that by this time these furs are more a muddy grey. They lack the glossy sheen, which has a sharp beauty when still on the living body of those lithe and powerful animals.

In the time Leyah was enchained she saw the King as treating her no better than a wretched dog. In that realization, something had come over her. The Animal, which lies within us all, was released. The feeling was an unfamiliar one since it was the first time it had happened for her. She's still led by it and so, as she approaches the King Leyah gives a muted growl, at the same time throwing off the women holding her arms. Walking tall, she advances alone to the base of the steps that lead up to the opulently carved throne on which the King has draped himself. *A little too casually, perhaps?* At least it seems that way to Leyah: *A little overdone?* It gives her added confidence.

Leyah stops, drops to her knees, and then presses her head to the cold wooden floor. Three times she repeats the obeisance, and then she stands to face him. She looks The King straight in the eye, holding his gaze for a few seconds until she senses him waiver. "I am your wife, and I will bear your children. How you treat other women I do not care, but I will be treated with the respect a Queen deserves." In response The Chief gives a snort of laughter. His courtiers join in, taking delight in the opportunity to ridicule her

- a woman they both fear and despise, for the usurping influence she might come to have over them.

In another building, a meeting place popular with the tribe's young Elites, focus is on a youth of medium height and build. It is hard to tell why such particular attention is being paid him, for there is nothing with regard to his appearance or bearing that arrests the eye. Nothing at all in fact that suggests he is anything above the ordinary.

The young man begins a carefully rehearsed speech, his voice quavering a little, "I, Prince Ivan, have been appointed by The King to preside over the kingdom whilst he goes on his last pilgrimage." Ivan pauses, looking around the room expectantly.

Again, about the large hall are pelts of White Bear fur, on which his audience lie propped against huge fur lined cushions. In various stages of undress the women copulate either singly or in pairs with one or more of the insipid looking young men present. Others are engaged in entertaining, with rough music and song, or provoking with their still clothed bodies.

None, in fact, are giving more than cursory attention to the prince's speech. However, at its conclusion the sycophantic audience of young men and women, regarded as the aristocracy of the clan, hoot their approval of his promotion with whoops, loud clapping, and catcalling bravos. The Prince makes an exaggerated bow, a twisted smile playing on his lips. One of them, a tall, thin young man with a ratlike face, shouts, "And you're to get the foreign woman, I hear, Your Highness. She should be entertainment for a while. When you've finished with her, pass her on to me! I could use a new mare, this one is getting a little stale."

Ratface slaps the broad rump of a pretty, voluptuously proportioned young woman laid over his knee. She pouts for a moment, then rolls off him, laughing lustily, and exclaims, "I must have worn the poor thing out. Bring me another one - or better still, find me a real man." Ratface turns red and

his eyes glare at the woman, who continues to laugh, staring him boldly in the face. The others join in. But laughter dries on their lips when The Prince steps over to her and kicks her viciously in the stomach, and says to the man, a menacing tone in his voice, "If you so much as look at my wife, your head will be on the end of a spike staring out over the empty plains for eternity. Alongside the young bitch that helped her escape. I am the governor of this land. Remember this: she is my property and you are my subjects."

An awkward silence drags on for a solid minute before being broken by the slamming of a door. Everyone's heads swivel around to see who it is. The man at the door begins a slow handclap, "Bravo Prince Ivan, well spoken. We expect great things of you as The Acting Governor.... The King has instructed the ceremony to begin: join us in The Great Hall if you will, Ladies and Gentlemen."

Everyone staggers to their feet, in various stages of drunkenness, and makes their way unsteadily across the open corral. Following a meandering path defined by Prince Ivan, some play the fool, which attracts peals of laughter when they slip over on the icy surface, ending up on their faces or backs, slithering about and unable to regain their footing. Ratface stops to piss in the snow. His girl takes hold of his penis and attempts to draw with it, some indecipherable hieroglyphics which they all find hilarious.

As a consequence of many hours of drinking and whoring - as is their wont on the days they're not hunting The Great White Bear - the short distance to the other building, no more than a few hundred metres, takes the young men and their companions an interminable time to traverse. When they finally get there, large wooden doors are thrown wide and they stagger in, still of loud voice. Arms are draped around a friend's shoulder or the waist of a girl or two, and they can be heard giggling like naughty children in response to the sombre atmosphere of The Great Hall.

"Cease your noise, whelps," barks The King from the far end of the chamber. There's immediate silence, and the young men, in practiced manner, quickly form an orderly file and make their way toward the stage. "Boy, come here and take your woman!She will give you sons and make a man of you."

At the lead of his entourage, Prince Ivan bows low and brings his hands together above his head in a supplicatory gesture. In a reedy, hesitant voice he replies, "Thank you father. She may make a worthy Queen Mother to the future kings of our land." The Chief looks at Leyah pointedly, then snuffs, "Don't be a fool boy. Fuck her, enjoy her, then rid yourself of her and find another. That is the way to treat women."

Ivan says nothing, and bows again. Then, for only the second time in his life he turns to look at the woman that he became obsessed with the moment he saw her first. After he'd found out his father had repeatedly raped her, he'd wanted to kill him. And when she'd escaped he'd been heart broken, but at the same time was overjoyed that Leyah had rejected the King's claim over her. He calls to her, "Your name, woman?" None of The Snow People have ever bothered to ask this of her, and Leyah feels unexpectedly drawn to the man. "Please call me Leyah, my Prince."

Ivan stares at Leyah, seemingly lost for words. It's the first time he's heard her speak. He turns first toward his father, "We will leave you now, Sire...." And then faces the crowd, which is now crammed inside the Great Hall. "May the celebrations now begin!"

As the boisterous throng roar their approval the Prince approaches Leyah and then, a little tentatively, takes her proffered hand. "Come with me, I will show you your home." A few minutes later Leyah and Ivan stand before a large building of similar layout to The King's residence but on a slightly smaller scale. At the door he stoops and tries to lift Leyah into his arms but,

still drunk and not overly endowed with strength, he stumbles, ending up on top of Leyah, sprawled across the entrance way.

A few of the villagers notice and fail to stifle sniggers. Ivan swivels around, but can't pick out who'd laughed at him. "Give that man forty lashes." Pointing in the general direction of a large group of men about to go fishing, his bodyguard has no idea who The Prince means for them to punish. So he simply grabs the man nearest to him and drags him over to a large rack in the centre of the corral.

Leyah can still hear the man's pleas of innocence when, now inside their bedroom, her new husband strips off all his clothing and stands before her, completely naked. She lets out an exclamation of surprise. Recovering quickly she comments at the prodigious size of his penis, which in fact has a narrow circumference and is less than the average in length. In every sense the boy is the opposite of his father. She sees a look pass across his face. One with which she will become familiar, though on this first occasion is unaware of its meaning.

After ordering Leyah to strip the boy hesitates, for the sight of Leyah's naked body both excites and frightens him. An awkward silence builds, which Leyah breaks with cooing words of encouragement. "Darling.... your body.... so fine.... Take me, my love, I am yours.... Yours alone."

For the next twelve months Leyah is the object of a man's obsessive passion. Ignoring his father's advice to treat her as a slave, a whore for his amusement, in fact Prince Ivan worships the ground she walks on. Leyah endures his endless demand for confirmation of her love for him. But however much she professes her devotion to her husband, it is never enough. An unquenchable need possesses him – the craving a drug for which any quantity would be insufficient. Leyah has become a fixation, a

poison to Prince Ivan's mind: and with his father gone on pilgrimage, it turns him into a tyrant.

As the days turn into months since the King's departure, Leyah, so often alone, has plenty of time to reflect. She recalls that, when she was first here, at least with The King there was laughter and, in their own way, happiness amongst the people. Now they live in constant fear, terrified of Ivan, or at least the position he holds - for he himself is nothing without the authority it bequeaths on him.

At first Leyah had attempted to reciprocate Ivan's love. But as she came to know him more she could only feel a rising contempt. Because the boy/man is nothing more than a pathetic child: spoilt, without ability, inept in most things he attempts. Every man is he jealous of: soon no one can recall how many have had their eyes burned out of their heads for simply glancing in Leyah's direction too long. And he neglects his duties. Within only a few months of The Chief's departure the once clean and healthy township is reduced to a filthy cesspit. With disease endemic, most newborns now rarely make it past their first few weeks of life.

On those occasions when he persuades himself he'll never own Leyah's heart, Prince Ivan sinks into a deep lassitude. He wastes hours pining for her, writing the most insipid love poetry imaginable, which he forces his friends to listen to. These tiring episodes are punctuated by moments of the most barbaric cruelty. He will take pleasure, a fixed smile on his face the whole time, in watching some innocent victim of his insatiable jealousy being ripped apart by wild bears, staked out across a raging fire, or being forced to watch the female members of their family being raped. His favorite torment, however, is to have these surrogates for his own pain repeatedly drowned and resuscitated. Until finally, when the red hot iron of jealousy has been tempered, and only remains the dull pleasure of inflicting torment,

with the drop of his hand the prisoner's head is held down in the icy water until all movement ceases.

For the people of the tribe he comes to embody all that is evil. One of those men that are still boys. Without courage or virtue, yet have been given the reins of power, but who know only, because of their mediocrity, how to abuse it. Ivan, Leyah notices on numerous occasions, takes an indifferent, a kind of careless, pleasure in punishing even trivial misdemeanors with the most calculated torture. And, amongst his friends, he allows them almost limitless freedom to pursue whatever inhuman cravings they whim to satisfy. She has seen this extend as far as, and beyond, murder, rape, cannibalism, and every kind of sexual torture imaginable.

Or his friend's pleasure might be for material gain: expropriating a family's entire capital wealth, or their means of income. And he, Prince Ivan, would join in this desecration of The Laws. Forcing a family into destitution, and then driving them out of the town, to face a certain death in the bleak wilderness. Leyah came to hear it often said, "Prince Ivan's evil knows no bounds. May The King soon return. Before we're all killed and he has no one left to rule over."

Ivan is a leader without any of the attributes of leadership. He seems to know this, for any man, even from among his friends, that shows the slightest talent for it, is cut down, immediately that Ivan sees it. At all times he seeks to stifle all that is decent, thus reducing the nobility to his own level of something unworthy of the least respect. He is spiteful, vindictive, and a crude boor without social grace. One moment the loud braggart, then when in the presence of strength, timid and afraid to speak his mind. Within a few months a once great tribe, in its own brutal way, is reduced to a pack of worthless hounds. During this time Leyah falls pregnant.

Sitting on a thick rug at the front of the house, taking in the morning sun, and with Ivan in jovial mood, she tries to reason with him. She pleads,

cajoles, trying to persuade him to rein in the worst excesses of his sadistic brutality. The change in him is instant. On his face, the look that terrifies her, throwing up crowding images of past abuse. His eyes glaze over; the rage takes him to another place. He screeches at her, "I am the King. Their life is mine from the moment of their miserable birth. I command, and they will obey without question." Then he hits her.

Recoiling, blood at the corner of her mouth, Leyah, without saying a word, gets slowly to her feet and, taking careful steps, walks inside the house. Ivan attempts to follow her, but one of the women from his ever present entourage pulls him back. Smiling, kissing his face, she coos in his ear, promising Leyah will get over it. But she does not forgive him. For a week she ignores him whenever, with the look of a beaten dog, he begs her forgiveness. In the end she seems to relent, but in fact it's only a caution to conceal the complete contempt she now holds for him.

But somehow don't they always sense it? And makes them even more desperate to win forgiveness. Prince Ivan is no different to this class of men who, with self esteem so low, their only recourse is to take out their feelings of inadequacy on someone they are certain cannot retaliate. The barbaric cruelty meted out on his simple minded subjects now knows no bounds. Through every day the screams for mercy from his victims can be heard over the town. Their pleas echo beyond it, into the vast, empty plains – an endless dirge.

With the streets deserted – everyone is afraid to step outside – Ivan has taken to pointing randomly at one of the houses. Within minutes it's aflame, and its inhabitants have been strapped to one of the bloodstained posts in the centre of the open corral. Their suffering continues until Death takes them: in this may be measured his only mercy. By each day's end the ice of the corral is a dirty red.

On the first day of the thirteenth month of Leyah's imprisonment - for she sees her marriage to the tyrant prince as nothing less - she gives birth to a pair of healthy twin boys. It is the first time she's experienced genuine pleasure in this place so bereft of joy. But her happiness dies with the dawn's breaking. For from that day forth Ivan ignores Leyah as if she weren't there. He now showers his warped form of love entirely on his newborn children. Leyah is barely allowed near them, which breaks her heart. For they are happy, boisterous boys and in those early months unknowing and carefree.

It becomes quickly apparent that Ivan no longer cares if Leyah stays or goes, is alive or dead even. The only positive, a great one though, is that the punishment of his people stops abruptly. Now, every evening there is great celebration, to which all the townsfolk are invited. For a while The Holocaust is forgotten, and life returns almost back to normal.

Leyah, meanwhile, has not forgotten - not for one day - the words of The Great Bear. Nor has she forgotten her Destiny: to be holder of The Knowledge of all The Universes. But, with the opportunity at last to leave, she cannot. What mother could? How could she let her husband inculcate all his weaknesses into their children. So pathetic he cannot stand up to his father. And without his father's power would be a nondescript. Women, children even, laugh behind his back.

The reprieve from Ivan's tormenting of his subjects is unfortunately short lived. After six months the casual violence and calculated cruelty is reestablished as a daily ritual. No one is safe from it - the whole town is once again terrified by his spiteful, vindictive tantrums. It is, after all, that which defines the man. Once again children are made fatherless. Families left destitute for the most insignificant transgression, or more frequently, for no reason at all.

With this the tribe sinks to such a low that hunting expeditions fail to bring home enough to feed them. This is blamed on bad luck by Ivan and his sycophants. Though the cause should be more rightly attributed to a weak minded lassitude that has enveloped the hunters, who no longer feel a shred of pride in being Warriors of The Snow People. The Great Bears easily evade their now ineffectual attacks, leaving numbers of the warriors dead or maimed, which of course only reduces further their ability to hunt. Fish and seaweeds become the staple, but insufficient, diet.

Another year passes. Over this time Leyah has strained ever more strongly at the leash that forbades her from leaving her boys. In moments of solitude she recalls conversations she'd had in her dreams with Anil, The Great Bear. In his deep, placid voice, so comforting, he'd reminded her, "Our guiding star is our Life Purpose. We all have one, and yet most people never look up into the sky of their dreams to find it."

"Without a Guiding Star our journey will be an aimless circuitous wandering: its end, its beginning and all between, identical. But with a Guiding Star forever in close view we know the direction our life should take. It changes with each new existence and is the thread that joins them all. Each one closes on the ultimate Life Purpose – the joining of The Wisdom of all the Universes. With its discovery we will leave this realm and progress into another. Or perhaps into nothingness."

In fact these words, and those that followed, Leyah has contemplated every day since first hearing them. They came to redefine not only her own life, but also the way she saw the world and her interaction with others. "Of course there are lesser stars. Along the way we are able to reach out and grasp these, and lay them down on the path. Look behind as you progress along The Path of Destiny and you will see these stars, as the fires you lit on your travels to The Southern Pole: beacons of your achievement. In this you can see that one part of our destiny is the gain of the journey and the other is

the fulfillment of one great purpose. Yours, as you know Leyah, is to discover the knowledge of all knowledge: the joining of the wisdom of all The Universes."

It had been the second time Anil had told her this, yet she was still stuck in disbelief that this really could be her Life Purpose. Her expression revealed her doubt, and her shock at again being told it by the one she trusted most in the world. Anil had only smiled and slowly nodded his shaggy head. "You, who think you are nothing, less than nothing, have lived for many lifetimes. This is the last in this realm, if you're able to achieve your ultimate destiny in this existence.... You struggled to make connections in The Human Condition because you were an Advanced. Already a true Utopian. But you are not alone – keep looking for the diamonds among the coal dust."

Anil had paused to let this sink in before continuing, "I think you are ready, but let us see, fate has its own lessons to teach us.... Believe in yourself Leyah. Never feel alone, the strength of all goodness is on your side. You have the power to overcome all. Fear nothing and no one: though remember, evil may present itself in many forms. As you have seen, through many lifetimes, in Balthazar."

But though now desperate to renew her journey, and fulfill her life purpose – for without doing so she would feel her life had been without meaning – she cannot leave her boys. She is torn in two. For it seems to Leyah – who's still rarely allowed near them – that with each passing day that her boys are without firm guidance and a healthy love, they come more and more to resemble their father. In their every action they are the nastiest, most spoilt brats one could imagine, capable of the most cruel and spiteful acts upon the other children of the tribe.

She comes to dread seeing them out in the corral, because they seem unable to control the urge to hurt the other children. And find twisted delight

in reminding them, at every opportunity, in the same calculated, vindictive ways as their father, of their superiority. Of their dominion over them. And this only becomes even more obvious once they can express themselves. Leyah finds it impossible to paint any other picture: they are irredeemable. The Twins are destined to become, as their father, men of no account.

Finally convinced that she can do nothing to help her boys, Leyah has permitted herself the right to leave. Given the lack of interest Prince Ivan has shown in her for so long she makes little effort to conceal her plans, and she hears nothing to provoke her to rectitude. And so, in the early hours of the morning following the Twin's third birthday, Leyah is preparing to leave, and renew The Great Journey.

The town is silent - recovering from the Feast, and the festivities which followed the children's birthday celebrations. Leyah goes to the store where she's gathered all she needs for her escape. Though she knows there's nothing she can do to save her boys, it's with the heaviest heart that Leyah dons her skis and jet pack. Once again she is setting out for The Southern Pole, only this time she will be alone. *Oh, what I would give for the company of the two dogs now!*

She's still thinking of them when she reaches the foot of the escarpment she'd so ignominiously tumbled down all those years ago. As she removes the skis in order to begin the hazardous climb she hears a sound behind her. Spinning around she spies, less than a metre from her, the old hag - Balthazar's present incarnation. With hands on hips, she wears a querulous expression on her face. Momentarily, Leyah sees something glint in the old woman's hand. The light of the bright moons reflects off the finely honed axe as it falls, catching Leyah a deep cut on the neck. She collapses to the ground, her lifeblood pumping in great jets, forming a blood

red rose around her. The hag never spoke, but she didn't need to - Leyah is in no doubt who gave the order to have her killed.

The Journey Home

Several years later, at the exact spot where Leyah had died, three Great White Bears stand in a close huddle, deep in conversation. Leyah and the two dogs are once again reunited, and determined to follow their various destinies: she to gain the knowledge of all knowledge, and they to guide and protect her for the length of her journey. Theirs is a worthy fate in this lifetime, but a greater one will find them in their next. The larger of the two bears questions Leyah, "How will we know if the man at The Pole is not another charlatan? The last time didn't Balthazar transform himself to look just like the man described to you by Anil?"

The smaller one expresses the same fear, but Leyah waves their concerns aside, responding confidently. "Fate will guide us. Along the journey we may face hardship, even death, but all of The Universe is on our side. Anil assured me it's like this.... We're still on the journey aren't we? Only in another form. Even Death cannot prevent us from completing it. Whatever caused our life to end contained a lesson essential to us reaching our ultimate destiny. In our last lifetime we needed to learn to be more circumspect, more questioning. We assumed too much, and I was the most guilty of all of us. I was actually stupid enough to fall in love with the mirage Balthazar created."

She explains, "Sometimes in life, aren't we just going around and around in circles without purpose? But if we resist – refuse to learn a Great Wisdom – what can Universe do but shape for us another reality? A different perspective of the same lesson, in the hope that we'll trust in our Destiny, and this time learn it. In my case, I must learn to look through the perception, and seek out the substance. If they are different then I should question, *Why? What is the reason for creating a different perception to the*

*substance, if not to conceal a lie?*The Universe loves us, all of us, but it is a determined and patient teacher, and will not allow us to shortcut on any lesson." She then reassures them, "Don't worry, I'm certain that whatever happens we will reach this journey's end together. Let's ride the currents of our Fate. Release all fears: trust and feel safe in it."

In fact, in her heart Leyah has yet to feel the conviction she claims. But she also knows – for a Wise Voice had told her – that this is only an ignorance for her to overcome. It is a wise and cautious man that allows Fate to guide him down the narrow, rock strewn path that, with one wrong step, would send him tumbling into oblivion. Alone, without Fate's guide, we'd have no hope of evading all the perils we'll surely encounter along the path that points us to our Life Purpose, and guides us to its successful conclusion.

The three friends set off. Big and Small, their minds wholly in the present, revel in their strength and agility as they bound effortlessly on great padded paws across the packed snow, in a day covering a hundred or more kilometres with ease. The icy winds are almost forgotten, the only reminder of the bitter cold is the sting in their eyes, and small icicles formed on their nostrils. Their thick, crisp white fur proves ample protection against all this desolate land can throw at them.

Though they know they cover large distances every night, the land to The Southern Pole is virtually featureless, so it's impossible to tell accurately how far they've travelled, and how much further they've yet to go before reaching The Pole. But there's nothing they can do but put their trust in fate, that somewhere on the way they will be granted a signal which directs them. Carefree, for with such certitude comes a releasing of the spirit, at full speed they gallop on and on across the vast expanse of The Great Southern Plains.

For Leyah this very emptiness allows her mind to slow, and take sojourns around and through the lessons given her in previous lifetimes. Which, through circumstance, until now she's never had the opportunity to meaningfully contemplate. The clutter that normally fills her conscious mind gradually thins like summer clouds, and within this space she relives her experiences.

Why, for example, was she, without question, willing to trust Balthazar, after he'd transformed himself into the perfection of manhood? Was it blind trusting in Anil's premonition alone? She knows this is not the case; if it were she wouldn't be questioning her motives now. She tries to skirt the awareness of her fault, because to acknowledge it would be to admit something in herself she despises above all else when she sees it in others. Was this not the lesson though? He appeared as absolute perfection, in appearance and manner. In fact what she sought in every man, but had some years before concluded she would never find.

Her defences had been weakened by his physical attraction and her desire for him to have her. But more generally – hadn't it applied to women too? – she'd overvalued and been too quick to accept The Perception; giving only cursory test to the Substance of the man. Never once bothered – or only half heartedly – to scratch the surface of their glossy sheen. Had she not been like this with everyone? *Except yourself, of course! Where the expectations made it almost inevitable you'd fail.*

She recalls more of Anil's words. Jokingly, he'd taken on the manner of a stern teacher. "The first lesson: whatever the cause we pin our flag to – the goal of our Life Purpose even – if we grasp, grasp at anything, it will undo us. Another: however worthy this goal might seem, we must use whatever wisdom we can draw upon – from within ourselves and without – to check, and check again, that it resides on the side of Truth. Is not a lie, wrapped in pretty bows, and placed on the very boundary between Truth and Falsehood.

So near to Truth that unless we show the greatest caution, The Lie snares us. Whole lifetimes can be wasted in this way.”

As the great ice floes, undiminished and indifferent, rush beneath her great loping strides, Leyah's mind is freed to wander, to observe all the dilemmas of her heart and mind. And in so doing she scales a little higher up the mountain of all knowledge. She is still nowhere near its summit. And will only reach it at the final moment of transformation. For each grain of wisdom is only understood, each question only answered fully, at the exact same instant. This at the moment we acquire The Knowledge of all the Universes.

But then, dawn just breaking at the end of another night of fantastic adventure, the three friends come to a screeching halt. On the fourth hour of the morning on the seventeenth day of their trek they suddenly find themselves confronted by an impassable obstacle. Insurmountable that is unless one had wings enough to fly across a great cravasse the width of a canyon. Its depth is uncertain, for only fifty metres down all light is extinguished. Even when, after a few hours sleep, and in the bright morning sun, the three bears come to stand on the lip of the icy cliff face, it's as if the light is sucked out and they can see no further down than before.

For several days they run in either direction exploring the extent of this impasse to their progress. This questioning of their will. And the strength of their determination to attain the destiny Anil had promised Leyah. The days prolong into a feeling of suspension, during which Leyah can often be found staring blindly into the deep abyss, where she contemplates its meaning beyond the immediate.

Its power over me is not of its own existence, Leyah reflects. It's no impediment in those moments when attachment to my Life Purpose ceases. Of itself it's simply a majestic feature, carved from the snow and ice by the swipe of a giant's finger. Something to stand before in awe. One of Nature's

wonders. That if any artist had sculpted it, they would immediately recognise it as the pinnacle of their creativity. Could never better it.

To Leyah at times it is all of these things and more – it mesmerizes her, awake and in her dreams. But when her mind is clouded over by grasping desire then it is an enemy, one to be defeated.

She recognises it for its main purpose – the examination for a crucial lesson. "Whatever we grasp at will only obfuscate our mind, as in desperation we crave to possess it. How many time in this, and all, lifetimes have we failed in consequence of not taking this lesson to hearts. Living by it. If we can only acknowledge what we seek, accept (in both mind AND heart) that we may or may not achieve it, and ignore the lustful yearning – for it will always continue to claw at our heart – then will our mind remain clear and the best course of action reveal itself."

"Then will we be at our wisest, and most assured. We will accept without rancor that we may not reach our goal by the shortest route, but be forced to explore some long detour before we return to our Destiny Path. By this I do not mean we give up on a quest we have determined is the right one. No, Leyah, I mean sometimes we can rely on nothing more than faith in our Destiny Path. We must believe in our heart that, if we have done all we can, fate will guide us. Even if it appears, time and again, that we've been abandoned. Or that we've been driven off the True Path. That will NEVER happen. That is not how The Universe works. It is only our ignorance, not fully understanding, that it might appear this way. If our path is true Fate will always ensure we remain on it. However obscured, like an overgrown track, it has become. It IS there, beneath our feet; we have only to keep walking."

Leyah now recalls the dream in which Anil had spoken to her thus, which she had little understood at the time, but now it's meaning is fully apparent. Recalling these wise words it also occurs to her that this obstacle, at this point in her life's journey, has an even greater significance. The

crevasse, in Leyah's mind, has become an embodiment of all those who have ever blocked her path, and therefore until she can overcome this obstacle they still control her.

She cannot help wishing, wishing, "If only I might find a way.... And then they'd be defeated and forgotten, forever." In this way she repeatedly loses herself, in attachment to her Great Purpose. Again and again – it IS pernicious – she has to free her heart from clinging to it.

But from this painful experience – so like banging her head against a wall – she at last takes to heart the lesson: that we must remain detached, even from our worthiest goals, or they will be poisoned. She learns to comfort herself – and release her heart – by telling herself (how many, many times she has to do it!): *if not in this existence – then in the next.... And if not I – then someone else! I will then be the foundation on which they can build.*

She reflects then that those that prevent our progress – how she'd hated them! – appear to have the most meaningless, the SMALLEST, lives. Their only purpose, only wish it seems, is to obstruct. But then it dawns on her: they are there to make us question, and check, ourselves. Without them we might blunder on, heads in the clouds. Oblivious to the approaching precipice. Or wander blindly into an endless desert in which we become forever lost. And so to them, in fact, we owe the greatest debt. For without their intervention we might not be tested on that point, and assume we are beyond it, and therefore be deluded about the extent of our progress.

"What are we going to do? It's too wide to cross and as far as we've looked it's been the same, so we have to assume it's like this the entire length. I'm imagining it as forming a complete circle around The Pole, making it impossible to reach unless we find some way to cross the crevasse." Big is talking to himself, thinking out loud, hoping for a light bulb moment. Having covered by now several hundred kilometres in each

direction, the other two are only half listening since, completely exhausted, they've barely enough energy to stay awake. Big, meanwhile, is idly tearing at the sweet tasting blubber of a large sea lion. On their last legs, they'd met her sunning herself beside a large hole in the ice. She'd willingly given herself up to them when they'd explained their need and purpose: it had seemed almost as if she'd been waiting for them. In fact by now our adventurers are used to such fortuitous reliefs. Have lost count the number of times Fate has revealed itself in this way, providing for them at the very last moment. When they were about to give up, and by appearing had encouraged them to keep going.

The day has been another frustrating one. Whilst Big continues to talk to himself, the other two, already full, have started digging into the snow. They're looking forward to sleep's release, hoping that the new day will divulge a solution to their dilemma. "Why do we have to cross it?" Small - in that half state between sleep and wakefulness, when the barriers of the mind are at their lowest - looks surprised at his own question.

"What do you mean, Small?" Leyah, immediately alert, senses a chink in the high, flat wall of impossibility which has so far obstructed their advancement along her Destiny Path. Her only progress has been to solidify her detachment from its achievement. Without which she might have been blind to the significance of Small's question. "I don't know. I don't even know why I said it." Small laughs self consciously, "I was thinking of something else completely.... Of our making love.... Actually."

Small's voice had lowered and he now glances at Leyah uncertainly. She holds his gaze for a moment before reassuring him, "We should never deny ourselves love, Small, whatever our circumstances." She laughs lightly, "Distract me then. We can pursue our destinies later." Leyah reclines, having by now enlarged the hollow, making it wide enough for both of them to share, and deep enough to shelter them from the unrelenting wind. A

moment later Small has dropped into it beside her and the two of them are lying face to face on their sides. Big stands guard, himself only just visible above the parapet of his own dugout.

Leyah asks, "What made you think of making love, Small?" She has a gentle smile on her face as she runs a paw down his back, before embedding a set of claws in the full flesh of a thigh. "I'm always thinking of making love with you," he replies matter of factly. "I'm afraid we won't have shared enough love before it's time for us to part. And who, anyway, should ever refuse each other love when its untainted by any of the impurities?"

Leyah nods in agreement, giving a sleepy smile. She shifts onto her back, and turns her head to one side, exposing her neck to him. Small mounts her; thrusts deep into her, at the same time sinking teeth into her soft flesh. They share a violent game, the passion that is never far from their hearts, and at times like this can seem to take over their being. They are a physical embodiment of Love. An avatar; no longer themselves.

When it's Big's turn to share love with Leyah, it's a more tranquil and circumspect show of emotions. A more obvious tenderness is drawn in the snow, lit by the moon's full, and echoed in the fallen wind, which now mirrors itself to the rise and fall of their passions. He covers her, at the same time cradling her face, turned to him, and they kiss, tongues binding and releasing, faces locked as if about to devour one other. As a shooting star arcs across the sky they climax together, she gripping him to her so tight that, at the moment of release, they become a single body. Her mind emptied of all concerns, as Leyah looks up into the black night she sees a mirage of them spread across it.

All the next day Leyah's thoughts are engaged by a pleasant reverie of the previous night's love making. However a question, which allows her no peace, keeps invading her thoughts. A question she has the answer to, but

does not understand. "Why do I have the urge to simply leap into the crevasse?"

A hundred times already she's asked herself and her two friends this question. But she cannot find a rational answer. And they have forcefully and repeatedly indicated their determination to prevent her from such certain suicide. Then again, there appears to be NO rational solution to their quandary. The Southern Pole lies the other side of this gaping hole too wide to cross and they must reach it.... *Perhaps somewhere in the blackness the answer lies.*

"I have no idea what will happen to us. In fact, the whole future since we started this journey has been a complete blank. In the past I've always been able to project forwards, based on the events, the people, the situation around me, and anticipate the outcome. But now there's nothing. I sometimes wonder, should I stop and wait for the picture to clear? But something tells me that will never happen. Why am I now forced at every turn to blindly trust to fate? Sometimes it's terrifying and I think I'm going mad, but an old, wise voice – it seems to encompass all time – tells me that it will be alright. So I am content for my legs to take me."

Layah can't help laughing, as she recalls the three of them frantically running the length of the chasm; their expressions always so intense, desperate. "Did it come from him? I don't know. But have either of you thought of this possibility – what if the chasm is not a barrier, but an ENTRANCE. Which will take us towards our Destiny Star.

The three friends stand tall on their back legs, a few metres only from the lip of The Great Impenetrable. In the moment there are so many questions crowding in on them, and they have not the slightest inkling of the answer to any of them. Leyah breaks the silence with a roar, sweeping the air with a great paw as if to clear them of the thickening cloud of uncertainty.

"We have to do something. The longer we prevaricate we will become more indecisive, until I'm afraid we might persuade ourselves to give up and abandon our destinies." The other two nod their heads in agreement; it's hard to argue with the logic. But then in unison their heads jerk up and stare wide eyed at Leyah. "You mean we've no choice but to leap into the chasm?"

Leyah nods, "Right now." She turns and begins walking slowly away from the crevasse. After only the briefest hesitation, the other two follow. At first there's trepidation in their step, but gradually their bodies gather strength and their tread becomes more purposeful and emboldened. Some fifty metres from the edge they turn together, take a short look into each other's faces and then begin a great charge: into the abyss, to their fates unknown.

As the gap closes on The Great Emptiness, all Leyah's concerns evaporate. Those that have stifled her whole life. In this moment, she sees them so clearly, and FEELS them to be, as petty and inconsequential to the meaning of this life and her Infinite Being. She is pure energy. A Consciousness without constraint of space or time; at its supreme potential. An essential and integral part of the fabric of the Universe. She need never again doubt it. For the first time she feels complete, and free. Loves the simple, astonishing beauty of herself. As she takes the final leap her vision is blurred by tears.

The roars that accompany their plunge are almost immediately expunged. Swallowed up by the ice canyon, it seems almost a living thing at that moment, with the three Great Bears consumed by it. Separated by the blackness, their fall seems to last an eternity. In silence they are each alone, following their separate destinies now. Their most pressing fears cloud their minds, but as time passes and it appears as if their journey will have no end, they become lulled into a peaceful bliss in which the Wise Voice gives them the answers to problems that they've wrestled their entire lives with, and

never yet resolved. Love shrouds them in a soft purple light, soothing all concerns. The path to becoming their higher self never seemed so wide and the journey's end so near.

The Harbor of Dreams

Somewhere in The Universe Leyah, in human like form once more, becomes aware of a blistering sun beating down on her back. She draws a loose fitting white headdress a little further over her face. She's sitting astride a large camel, which intuitively she knows is Big, that's loping with slow and rhythmic step over the snow white sand. She puts a hand out and rests it on his shoulder, at the same time looking around for Small. She can't make him out - the camels all look so much alike. But then he calls out, and she gives a short signal of recognition. Small, who is without a rider, and therefore free to join them, trots over, and once again the three friends are reunited. They're in a train of several hundred camel, obviously on a well travelled trade route, for in the space of only a few hours numerous groups pass them going in the opposite direction. Some ignore them; others view them with suspicion. But by far the majority of the other caravans hail them with friendly familiarity.

Of course a million questions are screaming through Leyah's mind, but with an effort she forces herself to set them aside and focus on discovering something of their immediate circumstances. She scans the broad horizon. The intense heat aside, in a sense it's not so different to where they've come from - the desert is a featureless, unending expanse. Though unlike the flat as a table polar plains of Utopia, here the sands have formed into long, wave like dunes that roll out ahead of them to the horizon. In a moment of abstraction one might even hear the sound of them breaking on a distant shore, as seas must have done a million years before. There are even a few rock outcrops to break up the monotony of the landscape. They form short mountain ranges of varying height and length.

More surreptitiously Leyah examines her traveling companions, that number a hundred, or even a little more. It's a large camel train, bigger by far

than any of those going in the opposite direction, and making for the city from where Leyah's train had started out. She has no recollection of that place – in fact of anything before her awareness began a few minutes earlier. She wonders at their ultimate destination. Though from the conversations going on around her it appears that an oasis, perhaps a half day distant, is their immediate goal. From time to time its rich green canopy is visible above the dune line.

Our three adventurers, soothed by The Black Journey, are untroubled by the unfamiliar surrounds they've found themselves projected into. And willing to allow Fate to lead them. They trust in it, and in each other. As on the arctic plains, they find an almost narcotic peace in the empty landscape which is devoid of all distraction. And in the slow, meditative progress of the camel train. Her mind wandering, a feather blown on the gentle desert breeze, Leyah asks her companions, "We're all agreed then, that we're not in Utopia.... But I wonder, how can we find out where we are?" But the camels are preoccupied with their own thoughts and give no response, so she too turns her mind inward.

We've come so far – light years it must be – and yet it's so familiar. Is that the nature of physical reality? At some stage in the extent of our experience, however far we travel, will it eventually cease to offer novelty? A place never visited before – and Nature's beauty no less, its wonders as marvelous in their intricacy, their assault on our senses no less complete – will it be so much the same? And while there may be benefit in revisiting – to find new meaning, or to delve to greater depth – life is a journey along an extensive path, and I must remember that the physical world is not the only one. There is a whole other realm – the metaphysical – which has its own lessons and experiences, just as valuable, for us to gain.

It's only since the plane crash that Leyah had started to get glimpses of it. She'd heard mention of it but – with no map of understanding to navigate it

by – had discounted it as fantasy. The dreaming of a bored and listless mind. But from her recent experiences it had become clear to her that it's nothing of the sort. *And so, why dawdle over something we already know, when there is so much for us yet to discover? Places and adventures of the metaphysical world which, through the wisdom they inspire in us, enhance our understanding of the physical world, and our particular purpose in them both.*

For Leyah this understanding comes to her as her mind is freed by the desert's infinite Emptiness. For her, who had begun to feel that so much of the universe was now known to her, it's something of a shock to realise that she has as yet experienced next to nothing of this other world. At the same time she's aware (how could she not be, The Voice is so insistent?) that now is the time to begin its serious exploration.

The Great Journey has now started in earnest, and much of it will be in the metaphysical world. From this insight she concludes that she should work to untether her conscious mind from its preoccupation with the physical world. At first this feels awkward, but gradually she would come, over the ensuing months, to find her mind able to range quite freely between the two, until eventually the barrier between them would disappear.

In the middle of the slow moving train – though late in the afternoon the sun still burns strongly – Big follows in the steps of the camel ahead of him. For Leyah the route they're following remains essentially invisible – nothing distinguishes it; it appears to be without mark. She finds it further disconcerting, with the constant light wind covering their tracks, that the desert both behind and ahead of them appears devoid of any sign of sentient presence.

Leyah's reverie is interrupted by a bearded face looming close in front of hers. His head almost entirely covered by a richly patterned ghutra, of broad checks shot through with gold thread, the man's eyes are an electric

blue. They bore into hers. The bearded Bedouin interrupts her meditation with a barked command. "Rider, scout forward. Keep a look out for bandits and other dangers. Report back in one hour." Before Leyah can answer The Bedouin wheels his horse away and gallops off. Further down the line he stops again and orders another rider to join Leyah. She pulls Big out of the train and sets off at a trot in the direction the Train Leader had pointed.

Something in the way he'd spoken to her makes Leyah look down at her body. Like The Bedouin Leyah too is wearing a white thobe, which is somewhat stained and crumpled after so many days in the saddle. Her arms are the only exposed parts of herself. But even from that it's immediately obvious that in this existence she travels in the body of a man. Shaking her head she smiles to herself.

How easy it would be to get lost in the exciting novelty of the meta world. But there is still a physical world to contend with. Dangerous and unpredictable, we ignore it at our peril. I must discover The Balance - as there is in all things.... Let me keep a half mind on it, but not ever let myself become preoccupied by its frivolous dramas. The Observer: of beings and their behaviors. Not, as on Earth, feeling chained to a species I could no longer relate to. When freed - when I thought of myself not as human but a Utopian - my understanding and compassion for their struggles became at times so great I was overwhelmed with love. As Observer the insights that went with it still astonish me. How much more did I see when independent of the species - untainted by their crimes and petty misdemeanors. I should take the same approach again....

As Big breaks into a loping trot, Leyah takes in the changes in herself. First, quite obviously, is of her physical strength. She laughs, reminded of the innumerable times she'd angrily decried the weakness of a woman's body. *Be careful what you wish for*, she cautions herself. *With power comes risk, and responsibility*. But still, she can't help but revel in it. No longer prey

to every man's lust - how it had seemed thus for so long. An unwelcome burden, for which she could only shrug and hope that fate would spare her from the worst. Not plunge her into that awful place, being at the mercy of man, the Predator Animal. When the vulnerability that is all women would be cruelly, shamelessly exploited. Her very humanity denied. As a woman the fear was sometimes so great she'd hesitate to leave the security of her home. Yet now, in this body, how absurd that would have seemed.

More gradually there's an awareness of.... *Of what? A ponderous sluggishness, in my feeling.... Yes, that's it - a kind of dampening of emotion. The world is a simpler place because it's as if an entire layer - one which furnishes the feminine world with vivid color and depth - is entirely stripped from the masculine.*

At this moment the other rider passes them at a fast canter. Laughing, giving a loud *Whoop!* Leyah slaps Big on the shoulder, "Come on, let's be boys for a day!" She drops lower in the saddle, and the pair of camels race to catch up with the other scouts already a few hundred metres further along the faintly marked trail. They're heading for a low rise several kilometres distant, that the Bedouin had indicated they should reconnoitre to.

Competing to get ahead of one another, at an almost uncontrolled gallop they catch up with the main group - just as they reach the promontory, where they stop to make a careful scan of the horizon. With nothing untoward apparent between them and the next hill, which is much higher than their present position, the scouting group begin a charge down the escarpment. Then race across the wide, flat expanse towards the steep face of the long ridge of high dunes the other side of the plain. Thirty minutes later the camels are standing atop it, drawing gulps of air, but still stamping their hooves, impatient to keep going. Because they're drawn, animals and riders both, by the incredible sight beneath them.

A large, crystal blue lake - fringed by fruit laden palm trees which climb high into the forever cloudless sky - has an almost dreamlike quality. The mirage is completed by a wonderful city with broad avenues leading from one large, open market square to another. The streets are lined with tall, majestic houses with that appearance of solidity, immovability, which the desert always manages to evade. Everywhere the city is full of bustling life. Beyond the mirage there are grey looking slums. But they only serve to provide a backdrop to emphasize the city's opulence.

The contrast of the infinite yellow sea they've been sailing these last weeks with this island of color and splendor is shocking to the eye. She is a woman impossible to resist, with open arms and eyes expressing invitation to all that a man could ever desire. Leyah, her senses bereft of splendid ostentation for so long, is bewitched by this desert paradise. She begs permission to keep going to the oasis. But the other riders are insistent they should return together.

And so it is that it's not for another four hours, as night is falling and the stars begin their flickering, that the weary but exuberant travellers reach their destination. The moons and the stars which, during their long journey, provided pleasant distraction, have nothing with which to match the attractions of The Woman of the Desert - this lavish, bountiful Elysium.

For the first few days the three friends are content to explore the extent of this island of the mind. Leyah spends her nights, alone on the roof of the hostel, looking up at the stars. They're so sharply clear, and look so close, she need only stretch out her hand to pick the night sky's magical fruit. In the peaceful silence that descends over the city at an early hour, Leyah takes time to contemplate their situation, and how best to respond to it.

Really, what is an island? Don't we mostly think of it as something full of life and sustenance, but also offering safe haven, in the middle of a vast,

inhospitable ocean of uncertainty? Of seas stretching beyond the horizon, and to uncertain depths where all kinds of dangers lurk: inexplicable, unexpected, unheard of? And yet, is any island truly thus: a separate unit, distinguishable from the sea. For it is small and low lying, always in danger of being swamped by it. One might say, returned. Rather isn't it all a part of something greater, encompassing the whole of existence – beyond.... to beyond?

How tempting it would be to remain in this island of the desert ocean. This intoxicating dreamland! But hadn't Anil told me to seek out the Great Southern Pole, and there find the man who would reveal the Wisdom of all Knowledge? And here, aren't we about as far as it were possible to be from it? However, it will not be an easy matter for us to leave – beyond this island's shores the seas are dangerous and inhospitable. For the ill prepared death would come quickly in this desert. But we MUST leave. There are few routes out of the city, and our Destiny lies on one of them. But as yet I've received no signal to direct us back onto the path of my Personal legend.

Leyah's resolve to leave the Oasis hardens. While gaining from the Captains details of the camel trains leaving the Oasis that week, Leyah is mindful of a sign to indicate which one they should join. But none is forthcoming. She never feels the now familiar pull, which she would have followed without hesitation. Her only comfort during this disturbing time is a recognition of how along The Path she's come. Before, feeling fate's tug she would have prevaricated in a spin of uncertainty, if not rejected it outright.

Without the benefit of other inspiration, Leyah makes a short lived attempt at patient rectitude. But after only a few weeks this thin curtain of delusion disintegrates. That night finds her on the roof as usual, but on this occasion not in peaceful contemplation. But rather screaming at the stars to give her guidance – until she can scream no more.

A lassitude creeps over Leyah. Though the wide avenues and ornately designed houses proved even more impressive up close, Leyah's exploration of the better quarters of the city has long been completed. Nothing of the place would again be new: thrilling simply because of having never been seen before. There still remains the rabbit warrens of filthy, narrow passages that harbor the poor, which extend, as an open sewer, beyond the last of the mansion houses. Or to be more accurate, beyond the lakes that fringe them, which the civic planners appeared to have designed as a moat. One to keep at bay the filthy hordes and their degenerate diseases – so as not to infect The Beautiful the other side of it.

The two camels, meanwhile, spend their days sleeping and eating. And, on occasion, languidly copulating – the heat allows nothing more energetic – with one or other of the female camels. Of which there are many, as in any town with such a large transient population. Despite their slothlike manner the camels in fact are just as keen as Leyah to get away. An inexplicable fear grips Big, that if they don't leave very soon they will die in this distant, inhospitable place and end up stuck here for many lifetimes to come. The roaring, cold winds of The Pole now hold an attraction for them that they never anticipated. Those were good times, barreling across the snow covered desert, their purpose certain, trusting in each other, and reveling in their shared adventure.

Another week passes. And in this dangerous world where complacency means death, rumors begin to swirl through the local population over Leyah's purpose for remaining in the Oasis City. Is she a spy? Or a criminal intent on carving out a patch from amongst the rich pickings of the wealthy merchants at the markets? They who trade the seemingly infinite variety of goods that pass through this great metropolis. But the place is a melting pot – all roads lead to it – and so Leyah is far from being alone in having a suspicious eye cast over her.

To those that question her directly she has a plausible answer - that she's waiting for a particular train that's going to an obscure town she'd heard mention of. And so, for the moment at least, the police are content to leave her be. Soon after the leader of the train which brought Leyah to the oasis informs her of their departure, and he offers her employment. She declines the invitation - she gets no sense that his journey is any longer hers to share.

Several more idle weeks pass, which are mostly spent wandering down to the square where, at a certain cafe, she's become accustomed to taking her breakfast. On this particular morning she's arrived much later than usual. Normally she likes to go there early, not long past daybreak, before the market has opened for business and the rush of people, the cacophony, has begun. She'd found the cafe the first morning she'd ventured down this way. On first seeing it - before she'd even gone inside - without knowing why she'd immediately been drawn to it. On entering it, however, she was no doubt. She found everything that she could want. The fruits and other foods on the menu are the freshest and most succulent; the coffee the most aromatic; and the waiters friendly and understanding.

The quarter reminds her of the streets of every city she'd ever visited in The Middle East: a superficial appearance of languid sophistication, but underlying it is an unpinning tension. Which serves to heighten the feeling of being in a place where exciting, dangerous things are bound to happen. One need only wait. *Oh how, in my youth with Mother, did I feebly rail against the feeling that I was going to be forever lost in a backwater. That everything was passing me by!*

Today she's feeling drowsy, her mind less than alert, dulled by the heat and forced inactivity. Time wanders indistinctly - the present no longer holding her attention. In fact nothing does. But then there's a commotion at a nearby table and, abruptly, she's forced back to the here and now. For the

most extraordinary sight greets her. It's as if a pile of rags is moving under its own locomotion. More disturbing, it appears to be approaching her table. The smartly dressed waiters, whom by now she almost regards as friends, are trying to shoo the Thing away. But it's persistent and ignores their shouts. And shows surprising strength when one of them tries forcefully to eject it from the cafe.

The Thing smells disgusting, and the stench, which makes her retch, precedes it by several metres. Suddenly the top half of the foetid bundle is thrown aside, and before Leyah stands one of the ugliest men she's ever seen in her life. Naked to the waist he proceeds to tap dance around Leyah's table, to her considerable embarrassment. It's as if he's deaf: inducement, protest, and angry threats by the waiters – he's unmoved by them all. And then, not satisfied with only dancing, he begins singing an awful dirge of which the lyrics include some of the foulest language Leyah's ever heard. It causes her to turn a bright red when some of it's directed at her. One of the waiters asides to her, "He's been watching you for days. He seems infatuated with you." The man of rags, still singing, then proceeds to describe in great detail a series of the most disgusting acts imaginable, which he claims to have seen performed on her in a dream. And now wishes himself to share with her in the flesh.

Several customers start to loudly complain. A group of waiters approach The Thing and demand it leave. When he refuses, two of them draw ugly looking daggers and start circling him. This city, though it has the pretensions of civilized society, is at its heart a frontier town. And though guns are required to be left at one of the various entrances to the city, there are of course plenty of other means by which someone determined to do so can put an end to another's life. By the way the two waiters had drawn, and now hold, their knives, their familiarity with the weapon is obvious.

At this the man snatches a water carafe and smashes it against the corner of Leyah's table. He presses a long shard of glass into Leyah's neck, drawing blood. While the majority had almost immediately scattered the scene, several of the cafe's patrons remain at their table and, despite being in no present danger, start screaming hysterically, which only adds to the tension. Leyah, despite being in the greater predicament, appears the most calm of all the actors. In a voice loud and hard she says, "It's OK, we're going to leave, you can all put your knives away." The waiters, somewhat reluctantly, scabbard their daggers, though as Leyah gets cautiously to her feet and backs out of the café Leyah's assailant keeps the glass pressed hard against her neck. In fact it's not until they're well down a nearby side street, and out of sight of the café, that he releases her.

Of course Leyah's immediate instinct is to get as far away from this creature as she can. But she hesitates, against all her instincts which are screaming for her to leave. For there is another, equally insistent voice, but this one is calm and logical. *What if this Thing is my destiny? And I, shallow, ignore it for no other reason than his unusual appearance. After all, how many times did Anil caution me over my fault in giving undue weight to perception over substance.* Uncertainty is overcome by relief when his manner changes abruptly. First apologizing for his behavior in the cafe, and then, in a sage voice, he whispers, "My name is Damocles. I can help you reach the place you seek, but you must not be swayed by what you see and hear. Allow fate to guide you."

Damocles takes a step towards Leyah. She instinctively retreats, but then stops herself when recalling that in this realm she's not a defenceless woman anymore, but a man. And a physically powerful one at that, who need fear no one, least of all this specimen before her. "Tell me what you mean. How might I be swayed from following the path to my destiny?"

Damocles smiles a toothless grin that manages to make him even more frighteningly ugly. Physically he has no redeeming features. His upper body is bent over, almost a hunchback. His limbs are scrawny sticks without sign of muscle. Leyah wonders where his strength came from, which was sufficient to effectively counter the efforts of the waiters to eject him from the cafe. His skin is barely visible beneath a glutinous coating of slimy filth. His uneven facial features makes one first stare and then look guiltily away. It's as if down the centre of his face is a fault line. The whole of the right side has dropped and is partially paralyzed. He has a thin line for a mouth, sticking out ears, and a large beak like nose. If there's anything to redeem him it's in his eyes. They possess an unfathomable depth, and great intelligence.

Damocles does not answer her directly, "In learning to live with our weaknesses, first we should resist the pretence of not seeing what is clear before our eyes, and to anyone that cares to give us study. We feign blindness because it frightens us, or makes us feel uncomfortable about who we actually are. Only by exercising a fearless honesty will we discover ourselves, and the rich palate of our failings. Look at our envy: only accept that the object or person is not ours to have. And again, again, remind ourselves of such inconvenient truths. For we can never defeat our weaknesses – it is an ongoing battle, testing us our whole life. But we can draw out its energy until it no longer controls us. Acknowledge it - not running away, or feigning blindness of it. Sit patiently with it, cultivating a detachment from the I. These are the best antidotes."

Leyah recognises the wisdom of his advice, and it draws her to him. But at the same time her physical revulsion towards him has only increased. Somehow, in the time they've been conversing, the man's features appear more distorted, his body's disfigurement more pronounced.

Their eyes meet momentarily, but then he looks past her. He appears agitated, pulling distractedly at his clothes. Still looking away, his voice becomes insistent, "You must leave the oasis. Your Destiny is not here...." There's a compelling assurance in his words, and Leyah feels she cannot dismiss them, "But how can I? I've always waited for a signal to tell me where to go."

In an instant his sombre manner changes. He throws out his hands and laughs derisively, his words dripping with sarcasm, "And how is that working for you? How many months is it that you've been here now? Don't continue to play the fool – if you haven't felt it yet, you never will. Somewhere, some day, it will come to you. But not here.... Leave now!" While they'd been talking, without her noticing Damocles had been sidling closer to Leyah. She cries out as he suddenly lunges at her, grabbing her by the wrist, holding with a surprisingly strong grip. He pulls her bodily towards him and screams, "You're mine! Give yourself to me!" As his lips part his mouth, which appears to be inhabited by nothing more than two rows of rotting gums, emits something that could only be described as the stink of the sewage pit.

Resisting an urge to scream, Leyah yanks her arm free, at the same time turning to run down the narrow alleyway. But after only a few strides she stops: ahead is a blank wall, a dead end with nowhere to run. Turning around slowly she prepares to fight her way out, now conscious that though he appears weak, it will not be easy to subdue Damocles adequately to make good an escape. She clenches her fist, feeling the strength in her forearms, and stamps her feet. Her legs feel robust, a solid foundation. With adrenalin coursing through her veins she feels alert, alive and, to her surprise, excited by the prospect of having to fight her way to freedom.

Turning around, body tense, she finds to her surprise – and some small disappointment, even as fear still grips her – that the alley is deserted. With

a sense of anti climax, on re-entering the square Leyah finds the market bustle is in full swing, and it's as if Damocles were never there at all. As if none of it had ever happened. This world of commerce, wealthy merchants, luxurious goods from the corners of the planet – it's impossible to imagine him being any part of it.

Leyah's sense of reality is shaken. It's almost as if – it's how it seems to her at that moment – Damocles exists in a parallel universe, which he momentarily dragged her into. But now, so sharply thrust back into what she'd always considered Reality, she's no longer certain what is, and what is not. He's left her with the feeling that not two, but an infinite number of realms exist and he, shaman, can shift between them at his ease. What's even more unnerving is the possibility that through him she too could travel indiscriminately between these many realities. The thought makes her feel dizzy, and she sits down abruptly at one of the chairs at the café.

One of the waiters comes over, solicitous, bringing water and kind words. She smiles, a little wan: after all it's not every day one meets a man such as Damocles, and is left with the thoughts that he's injected into her mind. As yet she's unsure whether they're poison, or antidote. Later, when talking about him to the camels, she'd tell them, "I thought at first it might be Balthazar again. But his usual method is flattery and beguiling charm. There was NOTHING, not a single thing about him, that holds even the smallest sliver of attraction. It was as if he'd gone out of his way to be as unappealing as he possibly could. Perhaps it's a new strategy, but Balthazar has a certain vanity, I don't think he could stoop that low. Anyway, we'll find out soon enough. I've no doubt it's not the last we've seen of this Damocles. And though he's disgusting, and he terrifies me, I want it. In some way he's connected to my Personal Legend.... Is he our Guide?" The other two had only shrugged, in a particularly camel like way, to indicate that whatever interest in Damocles they might have entertained was now exhausted.

After recovering herself Leyah decides to go back to the hostel where she and the two camels are staying. This necessitates passing through the market opposite the cafe. As she enters the bazaar there's a commotion up ahead at a perfume stall. Several bottles have been broken and the air around the stall is heavy with their scents.

At the centre of the disturbance is a beautiful young woman in plain, but clearly very expensive, clothes. Several things about her appearance remind Leyah of her mother. Like her she has a mane of fine red hair that frames an oval face. She has a generous mouth, and large, wide set eyes of an electric blue. Two young boys are trying to steal the lady's bag, and just as Leyah arrives they succeed in wresting it from her. She screams out. Without thinking Leyah gives chase to the boys through the narrow, twisting passageways of the Souk.

Despite the packed crowds it's in fact not so hard to catch them, since one of the young thieves has a crippled leg. It's this one that carries the stolen bag. On reaching them, Leyah grabs the boy by the collar. He squirms, desperately trying to free himself, while the other punches Leyah ineffectually. She cuffs him. Lightly she thought, but he's so thin – there's almost nothing to either of them – Leyah's shocked to see the young boy spinning away from her, before slamming into a nearby wall.

He cries out, holding his head. He then slinks away, and is almost immediately lost among the busy throng of marketgoers. His friend calls out plaintively, but when it's obvious he's not returning the crippled boy throws the bag into the crowd. Releasing the youngster, Leyah runs after it. Pushing through the dense mass of bodies, as he reaches it someone already has the bag open and is rifling through it.

Grabbing the purse from the man then running back to the market, Leyah asks where she can find the woman. The perfume stall holder, still complaining about her broken bottles, points to the cafe. As Leyah walks in

the whole cafe starts cheering. But she only has eyes for the woman, who beckons her over.

It's late morning and Leyah and Zara are lying in bed, having just made love. They're staying at a villa, which is located on the edge of the city. The bedroom suite is built out over one of the larger of the lakes. Over the previous two days they've made love in the waters under the villa, Zara lain over the half submerged steps, legs wrapped tight around Leyah's waist, back arched at the moment of climax, as she'd thrust into her. Have swum out to every one of the islands that dot the lake. In the gazebos there, which are hidden from prying eyes by dense foliage, they've gazed into each others eyes, as Leyah covered her. And on those same islands, in the night, she's ridden Leyah as she lay back on the sand, the shallow waters lapping at their feet.

They've barely spoken by this point. With Zara lying in her arms, wanting to impress her, Leyah tells her that she has a great Life Purpose. Intrigued, Zara asks what it is, but Leyah repeatedly refuses to tell her, "It would lose its power over me if I told anyone what it was. I might end up not following it, and then my life would be without meaning...." Leyah takes Zara in her arms; stares adoringly into her eyes, "We only have a few days, because I must set out in search of my Personal Legend..."

Pushing her away, Zara glares at Leyah, eyes flashing. Pouting, she demands of her, "You would leave me? When you've professed your love for me.... And I love you...." Leyah can't believe what she's hearing, thinking she was only a fling for Zara, since she knows that she's already married. She pulls Zara to her, "You LOVE me? You'd give up your husband and all his wealth for me?"

There's only a fraction of hesitation before Zara responds. Her voice dropping to a low purr, and tossing her head imperiously - so much the bitch

on heat – she tells Leyah, “Yes, why not? My family is also wealthy. It’s the reason he married me, I’ve been told.” Zara then frees herself and walks over to the balcony railing where she rests her hands. She looks out over the lake. Leyah comes up behind her and wraps her arms about Zara. “Could we live here, at the lake? You said your father owns it....”

“We’d live wherever you want.... So long as you stay with me.... for ever.” Barely giving it a moment’s thought Leyah drops down on one knee and promises her eternal fidelity.

Later the same day Leyah confides to Zara that in her previous existence she was a woman. That, though in a man’s body, she still feels herself more feminine than male. “It hardly bothers me, as more something to get used to.... When you’re on top of me, at times I forget that I’m now a man.” Zara, catlike, presses back against her. “I’ve often wondered what it would be like. I only thought of it as something physical, but of course there’s just as much the psychological lure..... a binding.... You’ve inspired me darling, I must get one of the servant girls to join us.”

From the moment they’d been seated together at the cafe, Leyah has felt as if she were in a dream. Her mind slowed, her thoughts have narrowed to the bedroom, and her desire’s fulfillment. The Great Journey is all but forgotten, and then only as an irritant, a persistent voice reminding her of her obligation to her Personal Legend. But every time she has only to look at Zara, or she caress her, and it’s forgotten. And so, when Zara suggests one of the servants join them her mind thinks no further than of the additional pleasure their bodies might enjoy. She agrees readily. Zara calls out languidly and almost immediately – as if she’d been waiting outside the door – a young woman appears. Though older, otherwise Zara and she might be twins.

The heightened and varied pleasure of their lovemaking is like nothing Leyah’s experienced before. Several hours later, basking in the afterglow of

passion, they all agree they should not delay its repetition. The servant girl promises to return later that night once she's completed some tasks at Zara's main house, a mansion in the most expensive quarter of the city.

Not half an hour later a thin man, hair slicked back, a black helmet close fitting his head, and dressed in an impeccable evening suit, throws open the doors to the lovenest shared by Leyah and Zara. He shouts an order, for the guards to arrest them. A moment before Zara had been asleep, and Leyah standing on the balcony, watching the sun set the lake on fire as it sunk below the horizon.

Zara is quickest to recover herself. She accuses Leyah of having drugged her, kept her imprisoned, and raped her. The servant girl steps boldly forward and repeats what she'd earlier told the Prince, Zara's husband. In a blur of movement Zara has a dagger in her hand and it plunged into the girl's heart. Before anyone's had the chance to react, she's dropped lifeless to the floor, eyes staring. Zara looks down at her, lips curled in disgust, "It was all lies. She only wanted to cause trouble between us. Ask the other girls what happened." They're each brought in and dutifully repeat what they'd heard Zara shout at the Prince. She then turns to a bemused Leyah, "I demand you throw this beast into the Dungeon Well. It's where he must have come from.... Let's see how well he swims among the other sewer rats." She then walks out to the balcony and slaps Leyah hard on the face. The crack still ringing around the room, she whispers, "How quick you were to give up your precious Legend. I wonder it was ever you claimed it to be, if you would abandon it so easily.... Though, of course, for me – why not?"

Leyah has spent a week in the infamous Dungeon Well. Twenty metres down, the walls as slippery as ice, there's no possibility of escape. The heavy bars that appear as a grid against the faint light are quite superfluous. The water level rises over the course of the night. The first time Leyah had

assumed that her fate was to drown there, but it never reaches above her chest. And in the day altogether disappears, revealing the dungeon's muddy bottom which has the stink of a sewer.

Leyah has resigned herself to a drawn out, lonely death when, as darkness is starting to fall, without signal a rope sling is dropped down. No longer able to stand, Leyah struggles into the harness. Once the ropes are beneath her arms, she's quickly hauled to the surface. Strong arms grab her and pull her out of the well, whereupon she's thrown roughly onto the ground. She recognises two of the Prince's guards. They appear about to leave when one of them casually turns and takes a running kick at Leyah's chest. She feels a sharp pain and a cracking sound, before falling unconscious.

Leyah wakes in her bed at the hostel, feeling like death. But, young and virile, her body heals quickly and the trial of the Dungeon Well is soon forgotten. Within only a few days she feels well enough to return to the cafe, where she hopes to find Damocles. She believes he's the only one that can help her. A growing fear has arisen. The greatest of which is of herself. Of her weakness in abandoning so easily what she'd told herself – and had sincerely believed – was her sacred duty to seek out and fulfill. But when she thinks back she can only laugh ruefully, wondering if any man could have resisted Zara's allure.

As soon as she enters the cafe one of the waiters approaches her, "We saw your crazy cousin earlier today. He said he was going hunting." Immediately she knows where he's talking about. She's heard about the place often enough, but has never had any inclination to visit it. "I don't know how he knew you were coming, but he said you'd find him there this afternoon, if you want to see him." One of the waitresses joins them. She looks at Leyah solicitously, "I heard that you were thrown in the Well... No one's ever before come out of there – dead or alive." Leyah had indeed found

human bones protruding out of the mud all over the base of the well. "There's a rumor that the Prince has a new concubine, and she pleaded for your release. He agreed and threw his wife into the Well in your stead.... You have a secret admirer it seems.... I can understand why." She flashes Leyah a smile before turning on her heels and walking away, her hips swaying provocatively.

A bemused Leyah goes in search of the camels. "I don't know what's going on. Who anyone is any more! But whatever else, we need to get out of here before the Prince comes after me.... The waiter told me that as soon as I was freed from the Dungeon Well the mysterious woman that got the Prince to free me has disappeared...." But then Leyah tells them about the message from Damocles. "So I'm in two minds, because he specifically said to tell me that he knows how I can find the path back to my Personal Legend."

The camels argue with her, "We can't stay another day.... As you said yourself, it's too dangerous to risk it. We need to leave with the next train leaving the city.... We don't care where it's going."

"But I'm sure he can help me! And if I don't hear what he has to say, I might never again find the path of my Personal Legend. I MUST go see him. It's only one more day!"

"One day too many. We're strangers here. Around every corner lurks danger. How do you know The Maze isn't a trap?" The argument goes back and forth, on Leyah's side becoming increasingly heated. "When I was in the well I realised how my life had been a waste after giving up on my Personal Legend. I'm ashamed of myself!" In the end she screams at them, "Go then! I don't need you to find it. I didn't think you'd be afraid of a little risk, when I would sacrifice everything!" The camels' heads drop and in unison they turn and slowly plod away.

Later she recollects Anil's advice, but finds little comfort in it, "There are occasions when we must be willing to lose everything to achieve our

Personal Legend. Though at the time it might seem there's no chance of our succeeding, we have the Universe on our side and if we are true to our Legend the risk is not as great as it appears." Regret pierces Leyah's heart. With the possibility of never seeing her friends again, she hates the thought of how they'd parted. Only the wrong words had come to mind and in the end she'd said nothing as the camels had walked away.

The Maze

Having followed the directions he'd given the waiter, Leyah finds Damocles in The Maze with no difficulty. Without prelude, she asks him which train she should join. He assures her that he'll tell her. "But first you need to hear this.... Listen! Or again and again you will lose your way.... As you allowed yourself to do with the Princess Zara." Leyah looks at Damocles suspiciously, "How do you know what happened between us?"

Damocles only spreads his hands and shrugs enigmatically, "Like in this Maze, along the path of our Personal Legend there are many forks. We must use whatever wisdom we have available to us - from within and without - to make our choice. We should not be afraid to make mistakes - if mindful we will soon realise and can go back and take a different turning.... Many times the Universe will plant on your path - you cannot miss it - an opportunity essential to achieving your Personal Legend. Sometimes it might seem only along the roadside, and easy to miss. This is a warning that we don't have sufficient attention on our Personal Legend."

"Leyah, there are so many ways we can drift from The Path. Even if we're not distracted, following our Personal Legend takes great courage. Many times it is a lonely, unforgiving road, and we might think it easier to turn a blind eye to it. But if you want a life with direction and meaning, you know you'll have to take it.... Looking back you'll see that at times you walked close to the cliff's edge. But if we kept in sight our goal, we rarely fall. And if we do, there's only a lesson in it. Failure is an essential, and inevitable, part of the Great Journey. In fact, if we experience NO failure we can be sure that we're making no progress along The Path at all.... Which would you prefer? Idling drearily - is that not a Death? Which only means you'll have to relive the test again in another life."

Damocles notices a look of despondency cross Leyah's face. "You need never worry.... If, at all times, you remain committed to your Personal Legend, with the Universe at your side you will make progress towards it. We may not reach it - it may be for someone else to take the final steps to claim the prize. Our fate is to be the solid foundation on which someone else builds. Are not all achievements thus?"

In fact Leyah is listening with only half an ear. As far as she's concerned she has only one purpose for meeting with Damocles. "You told me, the first time we met, that if I became stuck, without a sign to tell me how to follow the path to my Personal Legend, that I should not wait, but strike out in any direction. And that if I was mindful I'd know when I'd crossed again The Path.... But I can't risk that I might miss it! I might never find it again, and end up wandering - another meaningless existence...." Leyah cries out in despair, "I need a direction to follow.... And you told me you'd help me."

Damocles grins at Leyah, appearing about to place his hand on her arm, but he hesitates and then withdraws it. "I told you, it takes courage to remain with your Personal Legend..... Though in fact, in one sense every path is the right one. Because they all ultimately lead to the same point. There are only some roads shorter, less steep, less fraught with danger."

He breaks a wide, toothless smile, and takes a step towards Leyah. As always in her presence he's unable to restrain himself from wanting to touch her, or at the least, be close to her. For the first time Leyah doesn't feel the urge to pull away. Despite his awful appearance, and history of strange behavior, she feels drawn to him. She's reminded once again of Anil's warning - of her tendency to value perception over substance. Is, perhaps, Damocles here to help her break this habit? Her voice softening, she asks him, "I don't even know which planet I'm on.... What should I do, Damocles?" In a pleading gesture, Leyah takes one of his deformed hands in hers, and gently squeezes it.

"Look for The Monuments from The Gods," he advises her.

"Monuments from The Gods? What are they?" Leyah takes a firmer grip on his filthy sleeve. "Can you take me there?"

Damocles, his eyes narrowing, replies, "You will know them when you see them. Once, many thousands of years ago this desert was covered with fertile soil and waterways. At its centre was a great city. Majestic in its design, it was defined by opulence beyond measure, with exquisite jewels of architecture along every avenue it housed. Great temples with arches stretched across impossible distances, topped with narrow towers with intricately carved stonework soaring into the sky. Their pinnacles hung there as if suspended."

"Now all that remains are The Monuments, which are derelict ruins. But even in them you have a clue to what must have once been. In those bygone days there were Kings who loved and cherished their subjects. To the extent that, of all the stunning architecture in that city that gorged itself on beauty, the most impressive structures were reserved by the Kings as a tribute to the love they held for their people. For the Kings knew, and would acknowledge, that without their subjects' fidelity they were nothing. "After all, what am I without my people?" The King would tell them. "You are my strength, my power. But only in as much as I'm Servant of your will and collective interests. When our goals diverge the King becomes a despot, whose days are numbered on his back for all to see." This is all recorded in their annals."

"These Kings acknowledged to their people, through the great civic buildings that were the city's crown jewels, that it was their industry, their artistry that made theirs the greatest civilisation the planet had ever witnessed. I assure you, when you see them, you'll know you've found them."

It's not hard to imagine the impression these words make on Leyah, and once again her feelings for Damocles shift, further warming towards him.

She laughs to herself, *What, have I fallen in love with the beauty of his mind?*

Only, in some shock, to realise that's exactly what she'd felt. In the instant of this recognition within herself, it's as if he can read her thoughts. The old man, without doubt even uglier and more uncouth than she's ever seen him before, lets out a deep groan, grabs her arm and pulls her into a close embrace, kissing her full on the lips.

She'd had a plan. Not much of one - it's only advantage was its simplicity. But then it had all gone horribly wrong. Leyah had travelled to the outskirts of the city, where The Hunting Maze was located. As its name suggests, it's a series of thick hedges high and dense enough that they're impossible to see through or over. They're laid out in such a complex pattern that it takes most people at least three or four attempts to find their way out without the assistance of a guide. And since it's in their interests to maintain this confusion, every few weeks the guides cut new entrances and block the old with a frame across which the vines that form the hedges rapidly grow. Several times during the day wild animals of varying size and ferocity are released into the Maze - there for entertainment of hunters, to sharpen their rusty skill with gun or bow.

On the day of Leyah's rendezvous with Damocles, however, there's a particularly cunning wild boar roaming through The Maze. It has, for nearly a week now, evaded the bullets and arrows fired, increasingly wildly, in its direction. Despite their best efforts it's even escaped capture by the guides, who of course know the layout of The Maze as the back of their hands. A little infamy is good for business, but over the last few days they've started to see the visitor numbers dwindling. The few that came were the serious hunters, who'd all refused the guides' services on principle. Unsurprisingly, several of them had emerged from the maze somewhat in tatters, both pride and body bruised to varying degrees. It should be pointed out that Leyah was

unaware of these recent developments, and therefore rather casually disdained the assistance of a guide to lead her to Damocles. She'd assumed the lurid tales of ferocious wild animals lurking around every corner were merely part of a rather exaggerated sales pitch.

Now, the camels had agreed to delay their departure from the Oasis until they were certain Leyah was joined with one of the camel trains, and safely out of the city. Furthermore, concerned for her safety, they'd decided to trail Leyah into the Maze. At the appointed time, keeping a safe distance between them, they'd followed her into The Maze. On her meeting Damocles they'd taken up a position within easy ear shot - in fact only the high hedge of the Maze separated them. After several minutes they'd heard her muffled cry, and some altercation involving Damocles. Cantering down the wide tracks of The Maze, they'd rounded the corner and come upon Damocles, with Leyah lying at his feet. He'd held a dagger in his hand, which had a gold handle decorated with sparkling jewels and an intricate design cut into the soft metal.

Consoling Big, Leyah tells him what had happened. "The last thing I remember is that he had a tight hold of me, like being held by a powerful animal. I knew it would be futile to attempt to break free, though of course I tried. With the smell of him more overpowering than ever, and the usual desperate, pleading look in his eyes, as his face got closer to mine I felt a sharp pain in my back and I was pushed to the ground. I must have hit my head because everything went black.... Yes, yes, I think I'm OK now.... What happened while I was knocked out?"

".... You were lying on the ground when we found you. And Damocles was standing over you. As soon as he saw us he ran away. After checking on you, we gave chase. At first he wasn't hard to follow. You must have injured him because there was a big trail of blood. But after a few turns of The Maze the

blood stains got smaller until they dried up altogether. We were at a crossroads in the Maze, and we'd just started down one of the tracks when Damocles and the boar leaped out of the hedge. They pushed past us and then ran back the way we'd just come. Heading back to you...."

".... I remember that part! I'd just got up, and was feeling if there was anything broken when they ran past. Damocles shouted something at me and I was about to follow them when you and Small appeared." Leyah and Big are now standing by Small, looking down at him. "How did it happen?"

"Damocles must have stabbed him when they jumped out of the hedge. I didn't even know he'd been hurt. I just started chasing after them and I could hear Small right behind me. He didn't say anything.... I didn't know...."

Leyah hugs Big's head. Soon her shoulders are drenched in his tears. "I heard it.... the moment he died.... He just gave a loud sigh and then ran into the hedge and collapsed. He was dead by the time I got to him. His eyes were glazed over.... All the love you could always find in them, gone.... Blood pouring out of his mouth.... I hate Damocles.... I'm going to kill him...."

Small is laid on his side, his legs straight out from him. Leyah bends down and for a moment studies the blood encrusted wound in his belly. ".... You know, I don't think it was Damocles. Look." Big stares down at Small with large, baleful eyes, "The hole is too big for a sword – I can almost get my hand in it. And there's dirt around it.... This was done by the boar."

"I don't care, it's still Damocles fault.... He made you come here.... If you're well enough to find your own way home, I'm going after them."

Leyah looks up at Big and says tearfully, "Please be careful, won't you? They're BOTH dangerous." She then tries to get up, but her legs go from under her and she falls to the ground, unconscious. Big stares at Small. Time slows. Big's mind turns inward as he recalls the adventures they'd shared, through so many lifetimes. He wonders when and where they'll next

meet. Minutes pass in silent reflection and then, giving a loud sigh, he turns back to Leyah, still lying unconscious on the ground.

Big grips her clothes in his teeth and gently lifts her up on to his back. He then plods slowly down The Maze, following the same route they'd come in by. As they approach the exit he notices several guards of the Prince some distance away, observing everyone that leaves the Maze. Certain that they're looking for Leyah, Big hesitates what to do. But just at that moment Damocles and the boar run out of one of the other exits, sending everyone screaming in panic. In the commotion it's easy for Big to slip away without being noticed.

The next morning Leyah wakes surprised to find herself feeling none the worse for the previous day's attack. She goes down to the stables, where she finds that Big has found consolation in the company of one of the female camels. He tells her that he no longer cares about Damocles. His only wish is to see Small buried and then to leave the Oasis as soon as possible. Together they go to The Maze. Big drags behind him a stretcher and once they get there Leyah, with the help of some of The Maze workers, puts Small on it. They've already agreed where they're taking him: a rock promontory which looks out over the desert. It was a favorite of the three friends. They used to like watching the sun go down in a blaze of fire, when the whole desert became as if in flames.

Leyah unharnesses Big from the stretcher, leaving Small's body on the cliff edge. After waiting for the vultures to gather overhead, Leyah rides Big back to the hostel. On the way she tells him all that Damocles had said to her in the Maze. At the stables she tells him, "I need to find out more from him about the Monuments. Enough at least that we know which camel train to join.... Yes, I'm sure it will be safe. I'll meet him down at the cafe or around the market.... Yes, I promise, as soon as I've found out we'll leave."

Now, apart from the time at the Maze, Leyah has only ever seen Damocles at the cafe. Normally she'd find him somewhere about it, but when she goes looking for him there's no sign of him. Frustrated, she starts asking around the market about the ancient city, which had captured her imagination immediately Damocles had described it to her. But no one has heard of it. Despondent, after a day of fruitless search, she trudges back to the hostel.

Wearily climbing the stairs, when Leyah reaches her room she doesn't notice the door is already unlocked. Without thinking she pushes it open and enters the small suite tucked away at the back of the hostel. Having stayed there for several months now, she's begun to think of it as home. Damocles forgotten, distractedly Leyah makes her way out to the balcony. She feels imprisoned inside, as if in there her feelings might explode. Looking up into the starlight sky, she sucks in the fresh night air. And then, not bothering to take off her clothes, she stumbles into the shower. But the cold jets, which she'd hoped would revive her from the still oppressive heat, have no effect. Stripping off her clothes, she throws herself on the bed. In a moment Leyah is fast asleep.

At first she'd thought she was still dreaming. She's in the desert looking for The Monuments to the Gods. She's just seen them, outlined on the horizon, several hours ride away, when she hears Damocles whisper in her ear, "Have you found them yet?" But this is no dream. She can smell him - the revolting smell of Damocles that no imagination could conjure up.

Bleeding Hearts

Leyah is awake in an instant. And something snaps in her. A feeling of violation; her sanctuary invaded. An anger burns through her. She blames Damocles for Small's death. But there's also a stabbing guilt, for the last things she'd ever said to him. Because at the time she'd meant every word of it. And now, because of Damocles, she'd never have the chance to apologize, and tell Small all the things she should have said.... *Because of him.... He's to blame for everything!* The Animal in her, until now caged and buried deep, for the first time it releases itself and takes her over. It's as if she's watching another person. An explosion of energy, pent up over all those years since she was raped in Mogadishu, turns her into something wild and uncontrolled.

Damocles is a toy doll flung across the room, to smash into the far wall. She stands over him, staring down at him blindly, lost in a haze of fury. A roar comes from within the depths of her - unintelligible, of the jungle from which the Animal had sprung. Damocles has no chance to defend himself as she kicks him, with all her strength, to head and body. It's only when Leyah stops momentarily to gather her breath that he's able to jump up and runs outside onto the balcony. He tries to close the partition doors, but they offer Damocles no protection. Ripped off their hinges, Leyah throws them aside and lunges at Damocles. At the last moment he darts aside and she almost bowls over the balcony railing. Damocles tries to run back inside, but she grabs him from behind and slams him face first into the wall. With one hand holding him up by the neck, with the other she repeatedly punches him in the back. She seems to savor every blow, as Damocles cries out and begs for her to stop.

Leyah's vision has narrowed to a dark tunnel, at the edges of which everything is blurred. It's several minutes before she realises that Damocles has gone limp, hanging lifeless in her hand, feet dragging on the ground. She cries out in alarm, thinking she might have killed him. Letting him go, he slumps to his knees, and falls back against the wall. His face is a swollen, blood splattered mess. Leyah recoils. Herself again, it takes several seconds for Leyah to connect that it was her own attack on him that's left him bloodied and barely recognizable.

To her relief, after a few minutes he start to stir. Leyah crouches down, only wanting to help him. But at the sight of her Damocles throws up his arm and cries out. He staggers to his feet and backs away from her, screaming at her to leave him alone. She takes a step towards him and he jumps back, hitting the low railing. In slow motion Damocles tilts back over it. He throws out his arms, pleading for Leyah to save him. She dives forward, desperately trying to reach him before he goes over. But too late.

A second later there's a loud thud as Damocles hits the ground. Shaking, in disbelief, Leyah stares down at Damocles' inert body, lying in the dirt, blood pooling around his head. *What have I done! What's become of me?So attached to The Dream that I could kill someone to keep hold of it.*

In these depths of despair Leyah unwisely looks inward; becomes self absorbed and lost in the fog of self pity, at how hard and unfair life is. It's in fact the words of Damocles she finds solace in. That saves her from ending her life, just as the night sky is starting to lighten, at the early morning Witching Hour. As she stares at the dagger pressed against her flesh, requiring only a firm and determined hand to plunge it into her heart - she recalls words of his that she's almost forgotten. Why she's thought of them now, she's no idea. But then, by now nothing concerning this man is clear or distinct anymore.

There was a man who sought to help others - for he knew this was his path - but he did not know how. He saw how cold his heart could be. And too often he was absorbed more with his own petty concerns than the greater problems others faced. He had to discover some way to overcome these traits, not least because he had no desire to spend his remaining years in the callous, unproductive manner in which he felt his life had become defined. He must learn how to love more - not just people he knew but also complete strangers; even for those he bore hatred. An urgency gnawed at him, an awareness of time as something rushing past. He felt compelled to act without further delay, but he had no idea where he had to go. But at least he knew what he must do, for he'd seen it in a vivid dream. He must seek out a wise guru to enlighten him. This inspiration never left him.

One day he awoke and knew where to find his guru. It was a high country where wise men and women abounded. He'd heard about it years before, but had forgotten about the place, and the people, because at the time it had held no interest for him. But then, the previous night, he'd dreamed of it. And how, to reach The High Country, he had first to pass through The Lowlands, a harsh and inhospitable region filled with all kinds of dangers and temptations. But the man would not be diverted from his Quest. Within days he'd packed up his home and was on his way.

After nearly a year of journeying through The Lowlands he finally reached the border of The High Country. In the process he'd overcome many hardships and been enticed by Sirens in every form. Yet still, single mindedly, had he maintained his determination to find his guru, only once deviating from this goal. He'd cheated death at a Siren's hand, when temptation had briefly weakened his resolve. On another occasion, bandits had robbed him of all his worldly possessions, so that in order to continue his Quest he'd been forced to find work. After six months of back breaking

labor in the mines - terrified all the time, as everyday there was a fatal rock fall - he'd saved enough to resume his journey.

The crossing between the two borders proved uneventful. Finally he found himself in the city closest to where several famed gurus had found Enlightenment through solitary meditation, having spent many years alone in caves high up in the mountains. He planned to stay in one of their temples that dotted the hillside around the caves, receiving instruction from one of the gurus for as long as was necessary to achieve his goal. The temples lay only twenty kilometres distant from the city, across open ground no more than two days journey at the most. On a clear day the temples were visible from the balcony of his hotel.

However, between himself and the gurus lay the greatest of obstacles. Bisecting the wide plain was a fast flowing river which, over millenia, had cut deep gorges into the rocks and formed dangerous waterfalls. It could only be crossed with an expert guide. Naturally enough he sought one out, confident that in this city there must surely have passed many pilgrims seeking to traverse the river in pursuit of their guru. In fact he found plenty of guides, but no one would take him, however much he offered. And most strange of all, they would give him no explanation for their refusal. When he told them why he'd journeyed so far and the trials he'd overcome, they'd only shrug their shoulders indifferently. This went on for several weeks until he was almost ready to give up his Quest and make the hazardous journey home.

In the time he was searching for a guide he talked to many people, never failing to take the opportunity to describe the extent of his trials, sometimes even exaggerating those of his actions of which he was most proud. The man was a little self righteous, for was not his pilgrimage a worthy one? Shouldn't they admire him for his motivation; his altruism in seeking to help others? In fact, no one was the least interested in his story.

This was because the townspeople had heard so many similar tales, of great aspirations never realised, from the hundreds of travelers passing through their city every season in search of The Gurus. Several, in exasperation, told him, "There's a guru lives in seclusion on a hill just outside the city. There'll be no need to scale mountains and risk your life crossing the river. No need of the expense of a guide. You could stroll there in half a day. Why don't you go and see her? She's very wise, and will certainly take the time to help you: a woman of great compassion, she never turns anyone away."

At first the man responded angrily, "But I don't want to see her, she's not my Destiny. My fate is to seek out the answers in The Valley of The Gurus." They shook their head, smiling knowingly, and turned away. As weeks extended into months his frustration mounted, made only worse by the frequent reminders of the old woman on the hill. In the end he really had no choice – he'd exhausted all possible means of finding a way to cross the dangerous river. He went to visit the old woman. Of course, as soon as he met her he knew. The man would stay with his guru for three years, never speaking, except occasionally to ask for clarification of some of the more difficult points of her teachings. Or for her help to not only understand but – more importantly, she'd told him – to feel their essence in his heart. For by now he knew that it was only then that true and irreversible transformation would arise."

As Damocles had come to the end of his fable he'd paused, lost in thought, then smiled, eyes far away, full of love. "My guru fed and sheltered me, asking nothing in return, and taught me everything I needed to know to achieve my Personal Legend. At her side, my mind fell into a great peace, and my thinking was easily transformed by her wise words, and by her overwhelming love."

Ever since the night Damocles had fallen from her balcony Leyah has had a recurring dream. Nothing in it is quite clear. The woman in it she saw as herself, but the man remained indistinct. She had no idea who he was. In the dream she'd walked into a large forest clearing. It had a burbling stream running through its centre. Here she'd seen the man for the first time. He was on one knee, his arm draped over the shoulder of a small but ferocious looking bear, which nuzzled into his chest, grunting happily. But the moment it had seen Leyah its body had first stiffened and then dropped into a charging stance. The man had jumped up and run over to Leyah, taken her hand in his, and had told the bear that she was a friend. But the bear had refused to believe him and kept circling around her, occasionally pawing at the ground as if about to charge. "She's not a friend. She's a great danger to you. You should not trust her."

The man had scoffed at the bear's warning. Instead he'd leaned into her and pressed his lips against hers. Now Leyah, from the moment she'd seen him, had felt attracted to the man. Returning the kiss, she'd run her tongue over his, and pressed her body, moving against him. For a moment she'd been lost in a heaven, imagining all sorts of possibilities with him. But then, inexplicably, she'd blacked out – only briefly coming to with the man standing over her, a dagger in his hand, before falling unconscious again. She'd known intuitively that he had no intention of hurting her – rather was using it to fend off the enraged animal.

But then, only last night, she'd had the dream again. This time the man was distinctly visible: it was Damocles. And then it had all come back to her. Had he really saved her from the wild boar in the Maze? As she thought of it she'd realised that though the place had differed significantly, and it was a different animal, otherwise the dream fitted with the few facts Big had given her.

Until now Leyah had been afraid to go to the clinic where Damocles was taken following his accident. But after last night's dream she'd felt compelled to visit him, and hear from his own lips what really took place at The Maze. The next morning she goes to the hospital and is shown to Damocles' room. Sitting down at his bedside, she's unsure what reception he might give her. But as ever unpredictable, he welcomes her warmly.

After Damocles has finished recounting the events of that fateful day – which was essentially the same as had happened in the dream – Leyah sits back in her chair, staring at him. A movie plays through her mind, reliving snapshot moments of all the contradictions in his behavior towards her. Several times she thinks to say something, or ask a question, to try to understand his actions.

In the end Leyah only smiles and shakes her head, "So you actually saved my life. Not as we'd thought at all. In fact twice. I was about to kill myself after our fight – I couldn't see any point in going on. I felt so hopelessly lost – that I'd never find my way back to my Personal Legend. In fact, that with each passing day I was getting further from it. But that's when I remembered the story you'd told me about finding your guru." After apologizing for injuring him, Leyah asks Damocles to tell her the story again because she'd forgotten several details which she senses, at this moment, are crucial for her to remember and understand. When he's finished she's in no doubt, "Yes, I'd realised that, that it was about you finding your guru.... But you're mine, aren't you?" She continues to stare at him in wonder, "How lost I would have been without my gurus. Anil to help me discover my Personal Legend. And you to ensure I stay on the path to it. I dread to think where I'd be without you."

Damocles nods simply, "Few people find theirs alone. Most people need a guru to help to discover it. Without guidance they either find nothing, or make a bad choice. And then your existence is just as meaningless as

someone who lives without purpose. Many people live thus, thinking they're saving the world, when in fact they're complicit in its destruction.... In fact, even before having inspiration to start seeking our Personal Legend many circumstances must come together at the same time.... It starts with a dissatisfaction. That everything until now has been flawed. Something is missing in our life. We must find it.... It's only after we have that feeling, that certainty, that we can begin the essential conversation with ourselves. Who we are. What we really want to be.”

Damocles takes Leyah's hand in his. She feels no urge to pull away. “But what was the point of everything else Damocles? There's so much that doesn't make sense. Can't possibly help me achieve my Personal Legend.”

“Something you need to remember. It will help whenever your Ego tries to lead you astray. We're all part of a great fabric. A Tapestry in which we are at times servant to another being. We're not often the Main Actor, but most frequently rather the supporting cast. There to shine the light on someone's else's fault. A lesson they persist in ignoring which, by our wisdom – or stupidity! – we reveal to them. Yes, it's often our own disasters that act as warning beacons for others to avoid making the same mistake we've suffered for.”

“Was not Princess Zara so for you? She was there to show you that many people will try – not least from jealousy, that we have a strong and worthwhile purpose to our life – to deflect us from our Personal Legend. Their aim is to stop us following it, so as to render our life as meaningless as theirs. Zara manipulated you. Leyah, you will frequently come across someone who's stronger than you. In her case it was her physical beauty and allure that defeated you. But that was her function in your life, and for that element of her life.”

“In a moment she had you willing to give up your Personal Legend, for nothing more than a selfish entertainment to stroke her ego.... But, we don't

need to fear them. If we remain true to our Personal Legend, with courage and wisdom, and with help from the Universe, we will always find a way around those stronger than us. We have the advantage over them, for they are rudderless, only following a whim, as fickle as the changing weather. Yes, they lack purpose.... Have you wondered what YOUR purpose was for Small?" Having no idea how, but still knowing it with absolute certainty, Leyah realises at that moment that Damocles was the beautiful courtesan that had persuaded Zara's husband, the Prince, to release Leyah from the Dungeon Well.

In awe, she asks, "How could you transform yourself?" But then a chill goes through her, "You're not Balthazar, are you?" Damocles shakes his head and smiles benignly, "He and I are old adversaries.... Leyah, there are many things you will not understand in this existence. It doesn't matter.... Just trust that the Universe is always on your side."

A doctor enters. On examining Damocles he looks shocked, "This can't be.... I didn't think you'd survive your injuries – there were so many that were life threatening. At the very least you'd surely be incapacitated for many weeks...." He shakes his head in confusion. Still sounding as though he can't quite believe it, he goes on, "You'll still need to convalesce – you had a serious beating. But there's no reason for keeping you in the clinic any longer." He turns to Leyah and wags a finger, "I hear they still haven't caught the animal that did this to him. They could have killed him – very nearly did. They need to find him before he DOES kill someone."

After the doctor leaves Leyah apologizes again to Damocles. He only laughs, "You picture yourself still as the victim. Let me show you...." Damocles slowly gets out of bed and, using Leyah for support, shuffles over to a large mirror on the far wall. "Look...." Leyah towers over the scrawny figure beside her. It's so obvious that Damocles could be no physical threat

to Leyah that she can only laugh. "And yet, I've not been able to rid myself of the familiar caricature of myself."

Damocles squeezes her hand, "A warning - the boar was right in this regard. You have the Psychopath in you. But you were so beaten down by your mother that the behavior never surfaced. Be mindful of this - it could now be released in you. Remember, we carry within us all the strengths and weaknesses of our previous lives."

Filled with gratitude, and regret at her past actions, Leyah leads Damocles back to his bed, then asks him, "Is there anything I can do for you? When you leave here, won't you need help?"

Damocles gives a short laugh, "Me? No, not at all. But I have two children, they will need someone to care for them while I'm recovering." Leyah gushes, "I didn't know you had children.... Two boys you say?" She's reminded momentarily of her own boys and is filled, as always, with sadness, and a great dread at what they most like have become. Smiling through tears, she asks him, "I can't imagine them. Where's their mother? Do they look like you or her? They must love you very much...."

Damocles manner changes in an instant. He sneers, "You know nothing.... Meet me here tomorrow, and you can help me home." He then turns away, facing the wall, muttering to himself. Distraught, but afraid to say anything more, Leyah quietly gets up and lets herself out of Damocles' room.

Alone on her balcony that night, with only the stars for company, Leyah reflects on all that Damocles had said in the clinic, and what she'd come to understand of her intimate relationship with him, as her guru. She still has no doubt about this, however improbable it appears from his appearance and manner. *Our guru is a teacher, and that can come in so many forms, through so many means. And hasn't Damocles done just that?*

Still afraid of being arrested by the Prince, Leyah can't wait to leave the Oasis. But she feels a greater obligation to Damocles. To care for his two young boys while he recuperates. On informing Big of her plans the next morning, he tells that he can wait no longer. He looks sadly down at her, and very slowly blinks several times. "There's a train leaving tonight, and I'll be on it. It's long past time for us to leave. It goes without saying I want you to come, but if you're not there I'm still leaving the oasis today."

She tries to persuade him to wait. "Damocles is recovering quickly. It'll only be a few days at the most.... We'll be out of here before the week's end, I promise...." Big gives a loud cough and then spits thoughtfully into the dirt. Looking up, he stares balefully at Leyah, "I hope you find what you're looking for." Big continues to look at Leyah, eyes full of love, before slowly turning away and rejoining the other camels. Again lost for words, she can only stare after him, her heart breaking.

To Leyah's surprise, when she goes to the clinic they tell her that Damocles has already discharged himself. One of the nurses tells her, "He said to meet him at the usual place – he'll be there most of the morning." Leyah hurries down to the market, afraid she might miss him. She needn't have worried. Seeming without a care, she finds Damocles propping up a wall at the edge of the market, just down from her favorite cafe. As usual everyone is giving him a wide berth. On seeing him she slows. Wary, she pictures his dismissive manner towards her at the clinic. But on seeing her it's as if none of it ever happened. He breaks out a gap toothed grin and as she approaches he asks her, laughing, "So, have you found anyone else that knows The Monuments?"

Leyah shakes her head. "No, no one's heard of them." She doesn't mention an old man that had accosted her just that morning, on her way out to the clinic. He'd said he'd overheard her asking about the Monuments. "I've seen them with my own eyes," he'd repeatedly assured her. At the time she'd

been elated when he'd told her how they might be reached. But in the time it's taken to get to the market a conviction comes over her - something about his manner didn't ring true - that he's somehow connected to Damocles.

As so many times before, it's as if he hears her thoughts: "I know you still don't believe it, but when there's nothing else, it's not the direction we take, but simply the act of setting out. Because through that change you can initiate the rediscovery of your Path. Be afraid only of stagnation - it is death. The human condition is change. Be suspicious when all about you is familiar."

In frustration Leyah exclaims, "Why does it have to be so hard to stay true to my Personal Legend? It seems The Universe conspires against me at every turn to shift me from it. Clouding the sky so I have no sight of my Guiding Star."

Damocles scoffs, "Hard? Hard! You, your life is easy. You have a fine, healthy body and an intelligent mind. And sufficient wealth that you have no material concerns. You have received The Privileges of The Universe." He waves a finger under her nose, "And Little Princess, there is no Entitlement. No Free Rides. With privilege come obligation." She sees herself, and is ashamed. When Damocles grabs her hand roughly she offers no resistance. "Come with me - let me show you a HARD life."

He drags her across the jostling market square, pushing people out of their way, and yelling at them if they don't react quickly enough. From the wide thoroughfares, where hotels and great houses dominate the skyline, Damocles leads Leyah into a labyrinth of dark, narrow passages. They get progressively smaller until two people would be unable to pass abreast, and the light overhead is but a narrow strip that barely illuminates their way. She finds herself constantly stumbling, over what she doesn't know, because she no longer dares to look. Not since she'd tripped and glanced down, to

find herself looking into the staring eyes of a young child. It's head had been cleaved from its body which, naked, lay nearby.

After walking at a rapid pace for fifteen minutes, the whole while talking to himself, without warning Damocles stops in front of the non descript front door of a mud brick hovel. It's identical to every other one in the narrow street, all of which have the appearance of imminent collapse. He stops so abruptly that Leyah bumps into him, which causes him to turn. But it's as if she's not there: he stares through her, looking intently first where they've just come from, and then down the alley in the other direction. Leyah follows his gaze. It's only at this moment that she becomes keenly aware that the alleyway is deserted; that they are completely alone, and have been for some time.

Leyah is at Damocles' mercy, which is the very last thing she wants. She feels the high walls of the crumbling buildings close in on her, heightening the feeling of imprisonment. Warily she backs away, but Damocles' arm shoots out and he grabs her by her full beard. He pulls her face close to his and looks intently into her eyes, then looks away abruptly. It's unnerving, she never has the faintest idea what thoughts or emotions are running through him. And once again she's aware that, though she is physically a man, with the strength to fend Damocles off with ease, in her mind she still possesses the natural timidity of a woman, which enable him to force his will over hers.

His eyes suddenly come into sharp focus and he glares at her. Spit spraying across her face, Damocles yells at her, "You know nothing of hardship, woman. Learn this well." He kicks open the door. Inside is a single room. In one corner is a mattress, and on it lie two filthy children, neither more than eight or nine years of age. The only light comes from the open doorway and two narrow windows, making it hard for Leyah to see them or their surroundings clearly. Damocles pushes her inside, and the door slams shut. A length of timber is dropped into a frame to secure it.

It takes some time for her eyes to adjust, however the stench in the room had hit her immediately. Faeces covers the walls. Handprints, clearly from Damocles, are smeared across every one. And each is covered in a spidery, illegible handwriting. As Leyah gags, about to vomit, one of the children drags themselves off the bed and defecates on the floor. Damocles goes to a corner, picks up a bucket and hurls the contents over the child, who immediately begins whining. Begging for something it seems, for his hands are clasped together and he has a pleading expression on his face. It's impossible to follow what he's saying because he's speaking so fast the words run into each other. Intermittently he breaks into a manic cackle before resuming his pleas. He then begins to scream the most vitriolic abuse imaginable, first at Damocles, and then at his sibling who appears comatose on the bed. There is no one else in the room.

It's quickly apparent that both the children are crippled, with thin matchstick legs, shaped only by bone, without the curve of flesh and muscle. Leyah makes a tentative step towards them, afraid that any sudden movement might frighten the child. But the boy continues to ignore her. He concentrates all his invective on Damocles who, Leyah notices, maintains a fixed smile, devoid of emotion - least of all anything resembling love. Leyah looks more closely at them. Are they his own? Or has he somehow acquired them to exploit - they bear no resemblance to him at all. In fact one might say, if such a thing were possible, their features are the exact opposite of his. Beneath the layered filth they have the faces of angels, marred only - at least in the child awake - by eyes black and sparkling with the fire of hatred.

Ignoring the child's tantrum Damocles orders him, "Wake your brother, we have business to attend to." He slaps the boy hard across the face, sending him spinning across the bed, knocking into the sleeping child, who immediately awakens with a deep moan. And then he too begins wailing, clutching his swollen belly. "If you want to eat, brat, you'll have to earn it.

Come on!" Never, the whole time she's with him, does Damocles display the least hint of kindness towards the two children. It seems to Leyah that they are nothing more than a means, and he treats them accordingly.

He grabs the two boys by the hair and drags them across the room. Briefly letting them go at the door, he unbars it, before lifting them bodily, one over each shoulder. As he does so it's apparent to Leyah how featherweight they are. And their legs, useless limbs, dangle lifelessly like broken wings down his back. As he walks quickly down the alleyway, Leyah finds herself struggling to keep up with him as, with tears springing to her eyes whenever she looks at the children, she's finding it even more difficult this time to avoid the obstacles strewn across their path.

Again following a circuitous route Damocles eventually emerges from the slums onto a wide cobble stoned street, and into the bright sunlight. They're in the middle of a familiar market, one of the many Leyah had idled away hours watching the machinations of human commerce. Brisk trade is apparent everywhere. Here, the goods brought from distant lands across the harsh inhospitable desert and transferred between rich merchants will, with wide margin added, swell their already over laden coffers.

The merchants lounge on comfortable recliners, dressed identically. They're covered from head to toe in gleaming white robes offset by a gorgeously jewelled girdle, with a weapon, a sword or revolver, dug into it. The women, singly, or as a cackling brood behind one of the men, are adorned in the most fantastic colors of every shade and combination. They ooze wealth and sophistication. Leyah reflects, *Yes, these men that travel The Sea of Sands have seen in their journeys all there is to see of the world. They must have escaped the most perilous dangers imaginable. Have experienced all of nature's beauty and ugliness there is to see.*

Looking down at Damocles' offspring, filthy and in rags that barely cover them, the contrast is overwhelming. Unable to contain herself, her

heart bursting with pity for the life she imagines they must lead, she breaks down in tears. Damocles gives her a look of pitiless disdain before dropping the children to the ground. Giving them terse instructions, he then kicks them in opposite directions. They shuffle off, using their hands as feet, and are soon jostled, trodden on, cursed or, if they're lucky, simply ignored. The abuse begins in earnest once they start begging – booted out of the way, or a cuff about the head for their troubles. Sometimes it's less, but often far worse. But, whatever the physical abuse they're subjected to, it's accompanied by a continuous soundtrack of careless but vitriolic invective. While the tears still fall, Leyah can't help smiling when she notices that the kicks in fact rarely find their mark. The boys are quick witted and though disabled are adept at darting out of range of whatever's let fly in their direction.

Hour after hour Leyah forces herself to watch Damocles' beggars. She determines herself, *I must imprint this and never forget what I've seen – not ever forget these children*. All the time she's trying to think what she could do to help the boys. Ideas come thick and fast but time and again she's forced to reject them as an insurmountable obstacle presents itself, which is always in some way connected to Damocles. As the heat of the day begins to wane she decides to talk to him about the boys. She knows it will not be an easy conversation, but by now she'd do anything to alleviate their awful suffering, even in the least.

As the sun had risen Damocles had taken up a position in a dark corner of the market square, where he could easily watch the children without being observed himself. From time to time he'd shouted at one or other of the boys for their failure to draw out the pity of a passerby sufficient for them to lighten their pockets. Most of the time, however, to Leyah he'd appeared to be in a trance, allowing his gaze to wander over the scene, only occasionally to be caught by an unusual occurrence, which he'd then studied

with a manic intensity. At times he'd started a ferocious argument with himself, sometimes even punching or kicking himself, only to break out in cackling laughter.

When Damocles sees Leyah approaching him, he turns away abruptly. She takes his arm, "Please Damocles, I can't live like this. I have to help them! But I can't think of anything that will make a lasting difference to their lives. Anything, tell me, please!" He looks up at her. For a moment she thinks he's not going to respond, for his face has taken on a completely blank expression. Damocles continues to stare at her, still as a statue, for an interminable minute, before standing up, extending himself, it seems to Leyah, beyond his normal quite diminutive stature. On reaching his full height, he towers over her.

Leyah cowers, expecting another hurl of abuse, but instead his voice is quiet, almost a whisper, though with such a menacing edge to it that it sends a shiver down her back. "With all your privileges, all your advantages, you can't think of any way, not one, in which you can help them? Are you sure you've REALLY tried? Or are you so absorbed in your pity for them that your reason has been clouded?"

Indignant, Leyah replies, "Of course there's many things I could do for them. Give them money; find someone to care for them better than you do; arrange an education for them even. But I know if I came back in a year's time I'd find them doing exactly what they're doing now. YOU are the obstacle. You don't WANT their lives to be better. And they don't know any different. So even if I did improve things for them, it wouldn't mean enough that they'd fight to keep it. They'd allow you, even acquiesce, to strip away anything I did that was good. They only know this awful existence you pin them to. Happiness, freedom, being anywhere except in the gutter – it's alien to them."

Damocles laughs, "So what are you still doing here?"

"I can't leave! Because unless I stay, ever vigilant of your black influence over them, nothing will change. They're your livelihood, and if I took them away you'd only find others to take their place. I know I'm talking myself into a corner: there's only one thing I can do." Leyah wants to cry for these children, all children, whose existence is something no being, animal or human, should have to endure. But she stops herself and looks Damocles straight in the eye, forces herself to not give him the pleasure of seeing her tears fall. If she does she knows he would only sneer and ridicule her. And once again she'd feel defeated by him.

Damocles expression hardens, and his eyes go cold and empty. For a moment she thinks he's going to strike her and she flinches. But when he responds his voice is surprisingly tender, "Whereas before you might not have cared what befell them - they're a stranger to you - when we find someone suffering we feel connected to them. In their pain, we become brothers. It's natural to love them. Sadness is a great gift, embrace it, for it breeds empathy. Run to it as you would to happiness."

Damocles stares silently at the two children for some time before turning back to Leyah, "Let me help you - for I feel pity weakening your resolve. In another lifetime they will benefit from what you do in this one. In fact we all will benefit, if you achieve your Destiny Path. But if you merely choose to indulge yourself, with pleasures or misguided goodwill, and waste your life - not only will you fail them, but you will suffer tenfold. And be forced to relive the lessons prepared for you in this existence."

Leyah would never forget the quiet menace that comes into his voice at that moment. "Now go.... I never want to see you again. If I do, I will kill you." With that, Damocles shuffles off with his usual crablike gait and is soon lost in the crowd. She looks around for the boys but they too have disappeared. Leyah experiences once again the familiar doubt, wondering if it was all a dream.

Despite his threat - which would be so easy to carry out any night in one of the myriad poorly lit streets surrounding the hostel - Leyah is torn. Big is at that moment waiting for her at the camel station. But she cannot go. Guilt, at abandoning her own two boys overwhelms her. *And then there's him! Who he is!* In fact with Damocles, as so often, she doesn't know what to think of him. On the one hand, he's without doubt the wisest person she's ever met. And at times he'd been so kind to her - has saved her life more than once. And yet he could turn against her in an instant. And with his children he's the cruellest tyrant. It kills her to think of them suffering another day at his hands.

Leyah goes to Big, "I just can't leave them...." With the patience of a saint Big listens as Leyah's guilt tumbles out, "I have to figure out what to do with the boys.... Couldn't this be on my path?"

Big shakes his head slowly, "You know it isn't. Otherwise you wouldn't be asking me."

"It won't be for long, I promise. Just until I can find a good home for them, and then we'll leave.... I promise."

"SO many promises...." Big gives a long sideways look at Leyah, as only camels are capable of.

Did he already know my efforts would be doomed?The concept of play is completely alien to these boys. Their waking hours can only be measured by the amount of money they hope to collect that day, or the following.

The younger of the boys, the more avaricious of the two, squints up at Leyah and asks, "What's the point of learning to swim? How is it going to help us make money?" The two of them then go and sit at the stream's edge, oblivious to nature's glory, discussing where would be the best place to go begging the next day. Once she takes them to the lake where she'd spent several idyllic days at the villa with Zara. Leyah points out the children of the

wealthy merchants, as they frolic in the water. Or play, hour after hour, on the amusements – playgrounds, water slides, animal rides, a petting zoo. None of it interests the boys in the slightest. And then, that night, they complain to Damocles about Leyah taking up the little free time he allows them. Which they only want to spend sleeping, or perhaps gambling with the other itinerant boys that hang around the market.

On the days Leyah goes to pick up the children she sees many other children occupied in similar manner to Damocles' pair. There's also a few – mainly the older boys, though none she reckoned have yet reached puberty – that seem to be working for themselves, or with a group of other boys. Questioned, Ten and Nine (the names Damocles addresses them by) had told her about a place where homeless boys could find safety. They were provided shelter, food and clothing. Even an education if they wanted it.

Since Damocles' boys continue to express their strong disinterest in anything not connected to making money, one morning Leyah decides to visit the shelter. It turns out to be not difficult to find since, going around breakfast time, she soon comes across a steady stream of boys converging on a large house on the edge of one of the wealthy quarters of the city. On reaching it she's stopped by a surly looking guard standing in front of a large metal gate which bars the entrance to the shelter. A monster of a man, he has a nail studded bat dangling from a leather strap. As he's talking the man casually swirls it around his wrist before repeatedly smashing it with all his strength against a punchbag made of thick camel hide, which is suspended from the branch of a tree. When she'd first seen it, as she was walking up the walled in lane, Leyah had recoiled in horror – the dummy was so lifelike it had looked as if someone were hung there.

Her voice a little tremulous, Leyah asks, "I'd like to see the manager please." The guard walks around Leyah until he's standing with the low morning sun behind him, and shining into Leyah's eyes. "What reason shall I

give him for you wanting to see him....” Before Leyah can answer he holds up his hand, “Let me guess....” He then goes into a small brick hut and calls someone. Laughing, the man says, “Yes, another Bleeding Heart for you. Wanting to save the world. Do you have time... I can send him away with the usual.... OK, I’ll send him straight up.”

Smirking, the guard comes out of the hut and, without a word to Leyah, opens the gate and gestures for her to go inside. Leyah is surprised to find that while the grounds are bare of grass, or any other vegetation for that matter, they are extensive and the house itself could only be described as a mansion. Several hundred children, almost exclusively boys, are playing a wide variety of games, although soccer appears to be the most popular. The children are barely visible through the clouds of dust thrown up by their play, but they appear to be enjoying themselves and, collectively, the noise they make is deafening.

Of solid looking brick, the house extends perhaps fifty metres either side of a set of broad steps that sweep up to the main entrance. The building is over five floors. Out of every window hang a group of boys talking rapidly and gesticulating animatedly. Leyah is impressed – most of the children are dressed in clean clothes and appear well fed. On a broad deck in front of the house there’s several women of varying ages, and around them groups of boys have gathered, looking up at them with trusting expressions.

The Manager is standing at the building’s entrance, an imposing stone archway with a massive timber door, which is open at that moment. He’s smiling broadly with his hand extended in welcome. Leyah feels suddenly awkward – unsure of why she’s even there. The man is slight, of medium height, with a sallow skin and a thin goatee beard. His eyes are the most arresting thing about him – black, impenetrable, but bright and alert. She takes his hand tentatively. “The guard tells me you’re interested in working at the shelter.... Yes, volunteering, sorry.”

He looks Leyah up and down and then stares at her with an inquisitive expression. It's impossible to tell what he thinks of her, though a faint smile plays at the corner of his mouth. "...And that's wonderful... What skills can you offer? A carpenter? Electrician? A cook perhaps.... No?" His eyes start to wander from Leyah, across the grounds, and over the children. Then slide back over her, continually scanning the children as he's talking. Leyah gets the impression that the man is repeating a well worn speech. "... I'm sorry it's not open at the moment to show you, but we have a school. Have you ever worked as a teacher? Doctor? ... Hmmm, you don't by any chance have a farm? We're always looking for new food supplies." He sweeps his hand over the children, "So many growing bodies to feed."

Leyah responds despondently, "I'd love them.... And care for them...." The manager laughs, "They have plenty of that already, as you can see." And with that, the meeting is over, or so it appears to Leyah. He doesn't so much dismiss her, as forget her existence. As he turns away, he starts talking to himself absentmindedly, "Yes, they all think that's all they need.... You can't fill an empty belly on love, I'm afraid."

Leyah slinks back to Damocles' hovel. That night when they return together – Damocles kicking Nine through the door and clipping Ten around the ear – they find the room cleaned as they've never seen it before. A delicious smelling meat and vegetable stew simmers on the open brazier in the corner. And clean clothes for the boys are laid out on their bed. It appears as if an attempt was made to clean the boys' mattress, but it's so filthy it's impossible to tell.

After the morning's humiliation at the shelter, Leyah's not expecting much. She gets nothing. The boys kick the clothes off the mattress, throw themselves down onto it, and fall almost immediately into a deep slumber. Damocles shuffles over to the far corner and lies down on his bed, the whole time staring at Leyah, a half smile playing on his lips. Embarrassed, almost

in tears, Leyah goes over to the fire and ladles out three full bowls of stew. She places one by Damocles' bed, and the other two in the corner where the two boys normally eat. An hour later they wake up, shovel the food down like starving dogs, and then go back to bed and again fall fast asleep.

This continues for several days with neither the boys nor Damocles showing the slightest sign of appreciation for Leyah's efforts. But if nothing else she is resilient. And is obstinately determined to get through to the boys. She showers them with love. The few times they don't fall immediately to sleep, she brings their food to them. Asks them if they like it, "Or is there something else you'd prefer? Anything you want.... It would be no trouble at all." One time, Nine complements her on the food, and Ten joins in, thanking her for cleaning the room, which had been one of their chores. She tries telling them stories, but it's like with the swimming, they don't get it, thinking it's something that actually happened or is some kind of warning.

And then she notices them becoming increasingly wary around her, suspicious even, tending to huddle around Damocles whenever inside the room. "What have you been telling them!" she screams at him when Damocles comes home alone one day. He only smiles knowingly, "I didn't have to say anything.... You'd have to live in their world to understand. They're suspicious of kindness. They've heard too many stories, and suffered themselves. Nothing is free in their world. Kindness, in their experience, is always accompanied by expectation. Pedophiles, or their agents, congregate at the market in the evenings, offering ridiculous amounts of money to entice a boy to their home. So many of them have disappeared in that way...." Damocles rocks with laughter, "They trust me more. At least they know what I want from them."

Undeterred – for Leyah, rescuing the boys has become an obsession – she continues to keep home for Damocles. She takes pride in watching them leave home fed and well dressed. Finds real comfort in seeing them start to

fill out and look healthier. But then, as they get stronger, and their deformities impede them less, Damocles rails at her to leave. "Do you know how much money I'm losing to entertain your bleeding heart? DO you! I'll have to break one of their arms again if you don't stop feeding them."

In despair Leyah goes in search of Big. Of course he hadn't left the Oasis. Most days he's visited her at the market as she's dropping off or picking up the boys. As expected his advice is to pack up and leave by the next train. "But I can't leave them to Damocles."

"Have you tried to find someone to foster them?"

"Of course, but as soon as they see them they lose interest. Even the shelter refuses to take them back – Damocles pays them a cut of what they bring in from begging.... Does anyone care for them? Really loves them as I do?" She can hear it in her voice, but can't help herself – the desperation, wanting the boys to love her. Show the least sign – it would be enough. *Yes/ Of course it's like Mother all over again. But what can I do? All I want is to be loved. Is that so much to ask?*

But then she looks at Big, standing there patiently listening to her rant. She imagines he would stand there all night, if it were what she needed. Tolerant of all her faults. Loyal. Loving her – what else could it signify? A sentinel, he looks silently out over the plains, his eyes unfocused. So solid, dependable. For a minute she loses herself in recollection of their adventures together. The three of them inseparable. "Don't worry, I'll think of something. Just another week – I prom...." Big's expression becomes so inscrutably blank, as only a camel can make it.

Leyah returns to Damocles' hovel. As she gets closer her feet start to drag. She's thinking of Big as she opens the door – guilty that already she's taken too much advantage of his kindness and infinite tolerance. Before her is a blood bath. Damocles is standing in the middle of the room, grinning manically, the heads of his two children in his hands. Their bodies lie at his

feet – the stumps of their necks still pump blood over the floor. For a few seconds Leyah stares in disbelief, and then charges at Damocles, screaming. He drops the boys' heads. As she tries to grab him he ducks under her arms, whips out a dagger, and presses the blade of it against the side of her neck. "One slice is all it will take.... And your blood will fountain over me.... I'll watch your life emptying out of you.... As I watched theirs."

Leyah stares into Damocles eyes. She'd expected to find insanity in them, all control gone. But he shows no emotion – his eyes are empty, his expression blank. She hears her voice, screaming at him, "How could you do that to them? What kind of monster are you?"

He tells her, his voice calm and dispassionate, "I did it out of love for you. To free you." Leyah's mind goes blank. She gives no thought for herself – doesn't care whether she lives or dies. Though the dagger's still pressed against her neck, she tries to push Damocles off her. But he adroitly sidesteps and knocks her legs from under her. As she falls back he drops onto her, the dagger never breaking contact with her skin. Leyah on her back, Damocles half lying on her, their faces almost touch. "I've told you again and again, but you wouldn't listen. I HAD to do it, to free you. You have a unique purpose, as we all do.... This is not a game you can put down at a whim. It's our place in the Tapestry's fabric. We have a sacred duty to discover our Personal Legend, and then live it. You KNOW that helping these children, however worthy the action, is NOT your destiny." Leyah stares at Damocles, still disbelieving that he could justify killing the boys for this reason. "We can get distracted from our Personal Legend by others, as you were by Princess Zara. But more likely, we distract ourselves."

Leyah has no response. She closes her eyes and thinks of the boys – so lively, excited about something, laughing together.... *I gave them that.... But then this!* She glances at the gaping faces, wide eyed and staring. As she watches their youth, all their lives' potential, empties out in front of her, until

before her are the wrinkled death masks of two old men. In a fog of despair, Leyah can think of nothing to do. But then she feels the weight of Damocles across her chest lighten a little. Leyah throws Damocles off her – he goes flying across the room, slamming against the far wall. She’s about to go on the attack, but too quick he regains his balance and has the dagger ready. They stand facing each other, circling around the bare room. But then, for no reason apparent to Leyah, all the pent up tension in Damocles’ body releases. His body sags and he draws a hand wearily across his brow. In a quiet, resigned voice, he tells her, “Leave.... There’s nothing here for you now.... Only bitter memories, to fill your dreams.” He sneers, “Go find your Monuments.... This party is over.”

As if sleepwalking, Leyah stumbles blindly out of Damocles’ hovel of a home. Half an hour later she finds herself nearing Smalls’ Promontory, with no idea how she got there. She has a feeling she would find him here. Still some distance away she sees Big, head dropped, nuzzling the bones of his friend. Silhouetted against the sun, burned red as it drops below the horizon, he doesn’t see Leyah until she’s almost reached the cliff’s edge. She rests an arm on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.... For so many things.... We should have left weeks ago, but we’re definitely going tomorrow....”

Big stares down at the bones and shakes his head, “I miss him every day.” Then looks up and stares intently into her eyes, “Why the change of heart?” Big had almost given up ever leaving the Oasis – so many times she’d insisted she couldn’t leave until the boys were free of Damocles. *Hardly in the way I’d pictured it, but yes, in a sense they are free now.... And Damocles had promised her many times that they would have great lives in their next rebirth.* A pang of fear grips her, *I hope I didn’t do anything to disturb their fate.... Their progress.*

The Knowledge of the Universes

And so it is that the very next morning Leyah and Big set out in blind trust to their fate, leaving the desert city, that intersection of so many lives, forever. In thinking back to it later, apart from reliving fond memories of their adventures, Leyah would only recollect the feeling of frustration at the impediment to her progress towards her Personal Legend. For others it is a place that gives new impetus, fueled by experiences and ideas they gained there. Or a ship of wisdom. For others it causes a cataclysmic shift that in fact is too much. Seeking the unreachable, they will end their life in some empty back alley, or one day their sun bleached bones will be found alongside a desert trail one or two days distant from the oasis.

Taking sufficient provisions for a month, our two adventurers join a camel train leaving for the most populous route. In fact it's the same one the Caravan Leader had left on weeks before, and had invited Leyah to accompany him on.

As they get under way Leyah reflects on the crises she'd overcome only through Damocles' wise direction. *How easy is it to become entangled in distractions of our own or others making, and in so doing lose sight of our Personal Legend.* In fact Leyah is still full of doubt as to the wisdom of their departure. *After all, her logical mind tells her, What is the point of leaving this place, after all these months, on this random course which has all the appearance of leading us nowhere nearer to my destiny. But what else can we do except trust in the advice Damocles' once gave me, almost the first time I met him, and ever since to our last parting...*

Our last parting... Leyah's mind rears up at the image, seared in her mind, of Damocles' manic expression as he held up the boys' heads like some grotesque trophy. Her mind wants to bolt – run from the conviction she cannot escape, that she was as much responsible for their deaths.

Really, what other option did you leave him? Though he tried to rationalize with you, in your bone headed obstinacy you refused to leave. Leyah's only prop against a descent into madness is the sage advice once given to her by Anil, "You cannot change what you have done. And there is no gain in Guilt. It will only drive you to self absorption and inaction. Make a bold regret - that you will learn from the mistake, and never repeat it. In decisive action we're saved from the mire of self pity, into which we can only sink deeper and deeper."

Leyah would never forget the boys, nor her part in their deaths. But she does allow herself to let the burden of it float away, by dedicating whatever good she achieves in the remainder of her life to their memory. And she wishes fervently, with all her heart, that their next lives are all that Damocles promised they would be. She recalls something he'd said as she'd staggered out of his room: "Don't let your Ego glory in this tragedy. Yes, they gave up their lives in order for you to progress to your Personal Legend. But you have done the same countless times yourself. We are all the anvil on which other's destiny is forged." At the time she'd dismissed it as absurd. But now she cannot help but see her Ego doing exactly as he'd warned it might. Her only antidote, effective enough, is to bring up before her an avatar of her ego. She always pictures it as a little girl dancing and clapping, desperate for attention. How could one take THAT seriously.

To placate whatever misgivings Big might have had, Leyah tells him all the old man had told her about The Monuments. Though she keeps from him the number of people who'd never heard of them. And that several - extensive travelers through the deserts surrounding the oasis - had confidently asserted that they'd been along the route the old man had told her to take, and seen nothing remotely resembling the ancient ruins. In fact, for Leyah they now hardly matter. But she can never quite give them up as a fiction - her imagination was fired the first time Damocles told her about

them. There was a romance about those faded remnants of something beautiful, an embodiment of man's most outrageous dreams. His wild grasping at an unreachable star.

The camel train leaves, amidst much clamor, noise and dust, just as the sun clears the horizon, as is the tradition. As it wends its way slowly out of the city the train passes through the market place where Leyah would normally take her breakfast, the café being well positioned on one of the main thoroughfares in and out of the city. As they pass through the square Leyah becomes aware of Damocles. He has the two boys at his side. It doesn't shock her, not even when they look up from their begging at the passing train, and momentarily stare at her without recognition.

For only a moment before Leyah had a presage of this exact scene. It's as if she'd never been in their lives at all. Not that it was all a dream.... rather that she herself had been the dream. The thought momentarily terrifies her. But then it strikes her – *Does it really matter? Dream or not, what we accept as hard reality, is it really any more meaningful? Aren't they both just as filtered by our mind, one in our conscious, and the other in our unconscious. And what we learn, which is the whole purpose of existence, it makes no difference at all in which state we gain it. For what logical reason should we attach more importance to that fantasy of our senses which we call the physical world over the journey of our soul through the unconscious?*

The days pass as they were years. It is the most physically uneventful journey imaginable. Not a single thing alerts the senses beyond the sun's slow shift, and the occasional change in the temperament of the wind. But for Leyah it's a period in her life she'd never forget, nor regret having experienced. With nothing else to occupy her conscious, she spends her time in silent contemplation, mostly analyzing what Damocles had told her. And trying to piece together the cryptic clues that the metaphysical world had begun to lay at her feet.

She first recalls Damocles' words of encouragement when trying to persuade her to leave the Oasis. "Though we might once have been animals of the herd, with the Universe at our back, there's nothing to fear from walking alone. We have many hills and valleys to traverse in solitary fashion. We should look forward to it, for in such tranquility we may better, more comprehensively, absorb the lessons come to us."

Many times during those long days she shakes her head. At Damocles' infinite patience as her teacher. But most at her own willful stupidity. She rues most that she'd allowed herself to be distracted from her Personal Legend by the boys. But hadn't she almost done the same once before? As she reflects on this a great weight lifts from her heart.

While still among the Snow People, as she'd prevaricated about leaving her boys behind - who were becoming monsters more and more like their father - Anil The Great White Bear had appeared in her dreams. At first he'd come to her infrequently, but gradually more and more until she knew that whenever she fell asleep he was sure to visit her. It comforted her, knowing she would hear his voice, but it was always with a heavy heart that she'd awaken knowing she'd never see him again in person. Feel his warmth, an embodiment of Love, and his immeasurable strength: the feeling of safety in his arms. But then one night, as she'd tossed and turned unable to sleep, a great shadow had appeared in the doorway and Anil had called quietly for her to come outside. It had been a terrible day. Similar to others, but the violence and cold pleasure Prince Ivan had gained by inflicting pain on her had seemed far worse. And her children had witnessed it all.

She'd been playing in the snow with the boys, in the company of other mothers with their children. As always there was a distance between her and the other women; an invisible barrier. In the early days, when she'd first noticed it, she'd attempted to break through it. But it had seemed that the

women of The Snow People preferred to keep their distance, and so eventually she'd been forced to accept the isolation as just one more aspect of this life she'd come to hate. One she'd tried on numerous occasions to better, but was always thwarted by Ivan or the old hag whenever she made the least progress.

That morning the distance again had appeared a little diminished. Leyah's heart had been lightened by the thought that this might herald a permanent change. Her guard was therefore a little down. The next moment she was spinning across the ice, and then slammed face first into the solid frame of a timber sledge. Knowing what was coming she'd covered her head with her arms.

The side of her face had a deep gash from striking one of the sled's metal rails. Half blinded by the blood pouring from the wound, there was little Leyah could do as the kicks and punches rained down on her. At the same time Ivan had screamed at her. Something about her negligence as a mother, which was a constant theme, and more generally how worthless she was as a human being. She must have lost consciousness, because at some point she became aware that it was no longer Prince Ivan assaulting her. Rather it was her own two boys, using the same language, and injecting the same cold and vicious tone into their high pitched, childish voices. Worse still, even though they were small children that could do her no possible harm, there was something about them that frightened her, and it welled from the same source as the terror she felt for their father.

It was this thought that spurred her. That these boys, still only a few years into their lives, would already take delight in inflicting emotional and physical pain on those weaker than themselves. And furthermore, with their father as a model, they would do so ever more frequently as they grew older. Of course, it required little effort to fend off their physical assault, but this hadn't stopped her sons continuing to abuse her: *Whore Fuck Cunt ...*

Useless fucking bitch and other profanities they'd learned from their father.

With such words coming out of the mouths of these small, still angelic looking little boys, it was as if the devil had taken them over. She'd grabbed the nearest one and put him over her knee and smacked him as hard as she could. Before the other could escape she'd grabbed him too and put him over the other knee, in short work reducing the pair of them to whimpering tears. Leyah then had taken them by the scruffs of their necks and dragged them, balling and kicking, inside her home and ordered all her attendants to leave.

One in each hand she'd pinned them against the wall, then bent down on one knee so she was level with their faces. She'd begun to lecture them about how they should behave, first describing how they'd made her feel. Whenever she saw some understanding in their faces, she'd kiss them, and tell them how much she loved them. It was as if a flood gate had opened, and she'd poured out all her hopes for them, what she expected of them as a consequence of their privileges, and what she feared would become of them if they didn't change their ways. Whenever they'd tried to interject, still rebellious, she'd tighten the grip on their necks until they grew silent. At one point one of them had spat in her face: immediately, the other had done the same. The look in their eyes gave her the greatest despair. But it urged her on - *Surely some of what she was telling them would stick. Would counter the Prince's malevolent influence, even in years to come they might remember some of it. Surely the intensity of her love for them would cause some memory of this moment to stick?*

She'd no idea how long she'd talked to them, but gradually they'd grown silent, though still they'd maintained a sullen expression. Occasionally, something she said, would make them turn and look into her eyes, but mostly their faces were turned away, bearing a tight lipped, disdained expression. How long this might have gone on, who knows, but without

warning the door had burst open and Prince Ivan had stormed in, screaming at her to let his children go. He'd grabbed Leyah by the hair and thrown her across the room, picked the children up, one under each arm, and stalked out, not once looking back.

In the middle of the night, standing in the snow with Anil, flakes falling softly on her face, Leyah had leaned into his soft fur and asked, "Anil, what is to become of them? It seems there's nothing I can do for them that in the long run will make any difference. But I can't abandon them! What should I do?"

Anil had put an arm around her shoulders, "At times your destiny is to be a lesson on someone else's journey - we are alternately teacher and student throughout our various lives.... Your destiny is not to be a mother to these children. If you remain you will lose your way. Let them endure their fate, and walk their path. We all have sections where it's narrow and rocky, where our feet will break out bleeding and full of sores. They have such a stretch to experience in this lifetime, perhaps the entirety of it. With a clear heart and mind, let them go on their journey, and you on yours. It's time for your paths to separate. There are times when we must think only of ourselves. Save ourselves - for all our sakes."

Without Anil's wisdom Leyah knows she would never have left. And never once has she doubted it was the right thing to do - for her, for them. At the time she'd only been conscious of the futility of her remaining. But after the lesson with Damocles' boys, she sees now the dangerous precipice she'd skirted. How she might have disrupted her boys' progress. And halted her journey for her life's remain, and so rendered it meaningless. Leyah wonders, *How many times must we be reminded of the important lessons? But at least I need never worry - I see that now - the Universe will always be there for me. If nothing else, my time at the oasis has shown me that.*

For Leyah there's still a sharp stab to her heart whenever she thinks of her children - the two boys, once babies of innocence and hearts full of natural love. *How easy it is to strip that from a person, and almost impossible to recoup.... Really, they were not mine, because I had no influence over them. Isn't it that, nothing else, that gives us the right to claim parenthood - how much of our values and whatever wisdom we've gained, that we pass onto our children. After all, our genetic input is but a flicker in the fire that forges the human psyche.*

These, and many other thoughts, have occupied Leyah during the journey. In fact she would have wished it continue longer, there being so many things she needed the time to analyse without pressure or distraction. Time to walk around, prod and test, until she was clear in her mind about the lesson they brought her. During this time she comes to realise, as we all do when the noise around us ceases, how little she knows. And how much she still had to learn, not least from further reflection on her time spent with that strange, ugly man. That most unattractive mouthpiece of the most beautiful wisdom she's ever heard. *How impossible it is to marry with the contradictory images he chooses to present to the world, or at least to me.*

At the end of the fifth day the Train Leader calls for Leyah to join him. Several times she'd asked him about The Monuments, but he'd always ignored her. But he did that with everyone so she'd thought nothing of it. He's sitting on his fine Arab stallion on the edge of a sandy promontory, looking across the empty desert. When she reaches him he points, almost into the setting sun. Just to the right of it appears to be the silhouette of several ruins. Two thin needle like columns point into the sky. "You're looking for The Monuments. There they are. If you leave now you'll reach them in the morning, as the sun breaks the horizon. Only these two times in the day can you see them.... There's a small oasis there. It's really nothing more than a few tents strewn about a pond, which provides water for a single date grove.

All universally agree the fruit from there are the most delicious they've ever eaten. There's a ferocious pack of dogs that guard the prized fruit...." He lays a hand on Leyah's arm and stares intently into her eyes, "But you will have greater concerns.... Remember Anil...." Without another word he pulls lightly on the horse's reins. Giving a high pitched neigh it wheels sharply about, pivoting on its rear legs before bounding away. In a moment horse and rider, as one, are flying across the desert in a low gallop.

It's with considerable trepidation that Leyah and Big separate from the train and set out, feeling terribly alone, into The Emptiness. Leyah tries to raise their spirits with stories of their crossing of the Great Southern Plains, but after an hour they've fallen into a plodding silence. The night desert provides no stimulus to their senses.

Heads down, exhausted by nearly twenty four hours of continuous travel, neither of them notice dawn breaking until Big exclaims, "Hey, I can see my feet!" When they look up they find ahead of them, no more than a kilometre, the oasis that the train leader had promised they'd find. But there's no trace of The Monuments. The shapes Leyah had configured into columns are nothing more than dead palm trees from which the leaves have fallen.

When otherwise Leyah might have fallen into despair – she'd once pinned everything on finding the ruins of the once majestic city – she's so exhausted that she's only grateful for the respite from their trekking. It seems that Big has forgotten them too for he makes straight for the small pond, where he drops to his knees. He slowly lowers his head into it, trying to make last as long as possible the delicious feeling brought about by the cool, sweet tasting water. But barely has he sunk his weary head than an awful commotion starts up. The pack of dogs they'd been warned of appear, several of them dragging an inert and bleeding body behind them. To Leyah they look more wolf than dog. They howl at the rising moons and snarl

viciously at each other. A fight to the death appears certain at any moment. As the pack gets closer to the oasis they notice the worn out travelers, and immediately several of the dogs turn on them.

Big gets quickly to his feet and begins stamping his hooves in warning, but to little effect. The wolves are undaunted, so numerous are they it appears to Leyah they'll have little difficulty in overpowering them. At that moment she remembers Damocles jeweled dagger, which she'd found tucked into one of her bags the first time the train had stopped for the night. She'd taken to wearing its finely worked belt of gold. And would grip the handle of the dagger, as it seemed to hold a power for her whenever she felt her resolve weakening. She withdraws it from its scabbard now. Almost simultaneously one of the wolves, the largest, peels away from the pack and leaps at Leyah. She slashes at the beast, catching it across the neck almost as it's upon her.

As the wolf falls lifeless, almost before it hits the ground even, the dead animal transforms into a mighty warrior, with shoulders broad and arms strong, dressed in the flowing clothes of the desert. With a great roar the warrior hurls himself into the midst of the pack of wolves who, for a short time, put up a great struggle to overcome him. But with each slash of his scimitar their numbers are reduced, and the dead are instantly transformed into more warriors. Finally, with the animals outnumbered by the men the wolves slink off, now nothing more than whining curs. Without a word the warriors bow to Leyah then march over to a herd of tethered horses which they quickly mount and spur to flight.

With the danger over, Leyah's attention turns to the bleeding mass of flesh. It barely resembles anything except carrion for the birds of prey that now fill the skies above their heads, blotting out the new born sun. But to Leyah there's something familiar in the shape of the person, and with a cry she runs to him. It is Damocles, now even more revolting in appearance, his

face half ripped away and one eye hanging from its socket. Despite this, Leyah throws her arms around him, at the same time calling out to the women milling about, who'd been drawn by the commotion with the dogs. Getting no response she turns to face them, demanding their assistance.

One, looking surprised, asks, "Why, what help does he need? He looks fine to me. In fact.." the woman lets out a raucous cackle, "I would be more than happy for him to help me overcome this pain." At this she grabs her crotch, giving a loud moan, setting the other women off into peals of laughter. Leyah, assuming the old hag has lost her mind, glances down at Damocles. She recoils in amazement at the sight of, not a broken body, but the exact image of the handsome man Anil had described would guide her on Destiny's final length. And he's looking up at her, smiling, and completely unscathed.

Later, having by now overcome her initial shock, and then having asked him a million questions, she has one more. "You said I needed to find The Monuments of The Gods, but now you're telling me they don't exist. Why?" Damocles is reclining along with Leyah in front of the remnants of a huge fire, which everyone at the oasis has joined. The morning is still cool, the sun yet to gather its strength. Big remains asleep in the quiet of the shadows.

Laughing, Damocles replies, "Really, you still believe that story? Whenever has a King, or any person in power, respected the people they govern? When have they ever acknowledged the symbiosis of their relationship? Let alone demonstrated concrete proof of their gratitude. You will never find on any planet in the universe, evidence of a King that has built a monument out of love or respect for their people. A warning my Love - on your journey you will be given every opportunity and encouragement to deviate from the path. If you blindly accept the truth of all you are told you will extend your voyage by countless lifetimes.... Even question what you see

with your own eyes. You understand, even your senses lie, on the grandest scale?"

At this Damocles thrusts his hand into the fire. Immediately it turns black, crackling and sizzling like meat on a spit, until finally all the flesh is consumed and only the thin skeleton of bones remains. Leyah screams but then notices Damocles is showing no sign of pain. She stifles her cry and looks at him quizzically. As soon as he withdraws his arm from the flames the flesh immediately reappears.

Her mind reeling, Leyah cries out in a despair, her tone beseeching, "If I can't believe anything you've told me.... If not the Southern Plains, then where is my Destiny?" She jumps to her feet, "Or must I die again to reach it?"

Before anyone could have stopped her, Leyah throws herself onto the fire. Instantly she feels the heat, but no pain. Sees the flames all around her. Hears her flesh hissing and popping in the intense heat, and watches as it shrivels from the bone. She hears the wailing cries of The Dwellers of The Oasis, and then Damocles' voice, calm and authoritative, "Your destiny lies not within the flames. Go to the pool."

The next instant, not knowing how she's got there, Leyah finds herself looking down into the still, clear water of the Oasis, at a reflection of the horrible disfigurement of her physical being. Hair shorn from a head stripped of flesh. Though she can still see, where her eyes should be are only black sockets. Behind her she hears the wailing of the women and children of the oasis, and looking back she notices her body still lying in the fire. A second later she hears gunfire: at her feet the sand kicks up, then blackness engulfs her. A well aimed shot to the back of the head by Damocles, and Leyah's existence in this form is ended. The body she has already abandoned tips slowly forward into the still pool. Almost immediately it disappears below the surface, and after a few seconds the water is once again a smooth, flat mirror on the soul.

The children from a town established close to the ocean's edge will spend every free moment of their wakefulness in, on, or around the sea. The sand on which they play is so fine it is prized above all others by the sculptors of Utopia. They say it makes the best mortar, allowing them to create shapes in such detail that it resembles something living: moving flesh, the intricacy of a leaf, a flower or the smallest creature. The color of the sand is virgin white, and so it seems that every morning as the tide falls away, this corner of Utopia is reborn in perfection.

A wave, in faithful replica of the one preceding it, breaks on the unblemished shore. The rising sun reflects off the crystal blue ocean, so clear that the smallest fish, in a rainbow of colors, are clearly visible to any onlooker standing at the water's edge.

The children are waiting, as they do every morning at this time. After only a few minutes a shoal of dolphin appears, bobbing through the water with their languid grace, barely rippling the water's surface. As if the two are one. With the appearance of smiles on their faces, they stop less than thirty metres from the shore. It is the start of lessons for the children, who'd sat down and opened their books as soon as the first dolphin had appeared. Beneath a large shade provided by a grove of palm trees, and with the early morning breeze, the air is a little chilly. But it draws the children from their stupor, for some are still dreaming of the warm bed they've not long left.

During the lesson they listen, alert and attentive to the wisdom lovingly imparted to them. They make careful notes of what Leyah - with the Knowledge of all Knowledge, that all dolphins possess - has to tell them. She does not lecture them about Math or Science, or any academic subjects in fact. These are left for junior instructors to teach, as these are topics less complex than those the students have to wrestle with when they attend her classes. With her they learn the truly life transforming lessons. How to

become filled, overflowing, with love. How to integrate productively into Community. So that they're able to retain their individuality but also feel an integral part of something far greater than themselves.

After all, how many engineers, scientists and doctors do we need? Aren't the worst failures - the destruction of our greatest creations, bringing to a standstill whatever marvels of science we've engineered - caused by our inability to understand one other? To care for, love and empathize with those suffering. Or are merely different to us. What use are great Monuments to our achievements if we're only fighting, or locking ourselves away from one another, paralyzed. with distrust, or a fear we can put no name or face to. In the end there will be no one to enjoy them, because we were unable to avoid joining the infinite ranks of other extinct species. Evolution is a marathon without constraint of time. One in which the victor is the wisest - who can tell you most about all she saw along the route. Not the quickest.

Leyah teaches them to become wise, with heart enough to love all without discrimination. This takes several lifetimes for most to master. In fact many of her young students already approach complete understanding. They also know it is readily possible to achieve Enlightenment - an Ideal of Perfection - because they see it before them every day in each of the dolphins. They see how content they are, and they want to share in their bliss. With such enthusiasm it is not so hard for Leyah to show them how, step by little step, they can learn to ignore destructive thoughts and feelings, to the point one can say they don't exist. And in that state becoming only an infinite wellspring of love and compassion - when their first instinct is to listen not to those childish whinings, but The Voice's soothing wisdom.

With these transformations and by continuing to closely observe themselves, as both scientist and experiment, the children come to know themselves entirely, and become unafraid to confront anything they find in

their thrilling, ever eventful, journey of self exploration. Of course they have setbacks. But Leyah is there to guide them and - as with all those she's taught since she received The Knowledge of all The Universes - the children slowly and thoroughly remove all obstacles to their perfection. As we will all of us one day come to be. What is this perfection? When we think not of ourselves, our wants or fears, but place the needs of others, at all times, before our own, however much it costs us. To sacrifice our own life if it were necessary.

Leyah has been the teacher of the children of this community for countless generations. But today a new journey will begin into a different realm, which we can barely imagine, let alone describe. One in which we exist as pure energy. Where our emotions, feelings and thoughts are reflected by the changing color and heat of our form. Where we hold the power to influence all living things. We exist everywhere. Not just across all space, but in all time. For it is done: complete. Existence, all the Universes, all realities.

Though it is a more advanced plane, we will not enjoy the pleasures of the senses there. That wondrous gift of the physical scale, in which emotions and feelings are heightened by their physical duplication.

Yes, how I crave this drug – an addiction beyond resistance. Are there not times when I would exchange all that I hold most dear in the Universe for just one more second? Even the exquisite prick or burn of pain.