

THE FIRST BUDDHAS

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Chapter 1

Right View

Orbiting Fomalhaut: 17/12/2645 20:45

The silence was broken only by a faint background hiss that came over the comm link in my helmet and the occasional ‘bleep’ from an electronic system reporting that it was functioning normally. I checked on the head up display on the visor and saw that Natasha was online.

‘All systems online’.

‘Check, all systems online, Chandra you are clear to begin EVA’.

I reached out and pressed the green glowing square of the airlock activation control and it changed to red as the hatch slid open and I walked forward into the decompression chamber.

As the panel slid back up behind me I glanced at my suit display, ever since the incident at Tau Ceti III it had become second nature to double check at the last moment that everything was functioning normally. The lack of a full air supply charge had been almost fatal on that mission. Better to be safe than sorry.

‘Chandra, the latest readings indicate that the artefact will be in optimal position in 42 minutes, that should give you sufficient time to set up the instruments.’

‘Okay Natasha, that does not sound so long, considering how long it has taken us to get to this position.’

Natasha, laughed and said. ‘It has certainly been a long wait since Tau Ceti, good luck.’

I pressed the outer door activator and as the panel’s light turned from green to red the grey metal hatch slid into the wall and revealed a growing strip of total darkness. From this angle all that could be seen in the darkness were a few diamond like points of light of distant stars hanging in the deeps of space.

As I stepped out of the hatch I looked around. The hull of the ship was illuminated by rows of lights that stretched out into the distance to the right and left. To the left the lights led off to the control centre, from this angle a shining disk of lights and deep shadows. In reality a

sphere in which I and the other four crew members had spent the last two years on the long haul here. To the right the lights led my eyes to the immense bulk of the main drive array. In my mind I always saw it as a maze of spires and towers with intertwining gantry ways like the temple cities of old earth which had once stood in India. Okay, it was really an array of graviton pulse emitters clustered around a tethered singularity. A common or garden black hole drive in other words, like those which still powered most starships these days in human space.

The department had hummed and hawed about the funding to buy a more upmarket Bose drive, but in the end the funding had not been sanctioned. 'Insufficient evidence of a cost justification for completing the mission within the time scale possible with a Bose drive.' Had been the final comment on the application. So hours had become years two years. In other words, the personal cost of years of our staff time getting here and back did not add up to equipping us with anything other than bog standard tools. So it was we were given the Institute's oldest Research Vessel the "Garuda" and told to feel lucky we had been given anything at all.

For David and Emily it had been hardest. Neither was happy about leaving family and friends for so long. David was also pissed that it mucked up his chances of promotion at the institute. Unless, that is, this mission turned out to be a major find. For Natasha it was less difficult, she had already been out on several long missions and it fitted her research interests so she did not care.

Of course to Rom it simply didn't matter at all, we all treated him as one of ourselves, but who doesn't treat androids that way nowadays? Still, for him time was less of the essence, with an expected virtually limitless life span he had to worry less about time than the rest of us. For me, well I really didn't feel there was any choice. I had to get here. I would have even come in an ancient sub-light stasis ship if that had been how I had to get here. Not that taking centuries to get here would have made much sense.

'Chandra, Al Nair should be at about 143.5 and the artefact should be between it and Fomalhaut from your present position.'

David paused, probably checking something on a monitor I thought.

'Should be on a bearing of 25.30 from the instruments location.'

'Check, David, bearing 25.30, I am just approaching the instrument now.'

I looked ahead and saw that the installation was just a few paces ahead. It was perhaps a little ridiculous that I had to come out to check the calibration on this sensor array. But, after two years en route to this spot I was not about to let a calibration error interfere with this observation. The reassuring feel of my feet contacting the walkway reminded me of the miracle of artificial gravity. It was hard to imagine the early space missions before artificial gravity had been mastered. Imagine travelling in a ship which relied on spin to simulate gravity, or worse the debilitating effects of years of free fall.

I flicked open the inspection cover and ran my eyes over the monitor on the sensor array. Looked okay. Pretty meaningless that I thought as I connected the mobile sensor metre to the interface what I needed to check was the fine tuning. What we were looking for was after all virtually undetectable, a minute trace spectrum in the sensor of Invert Iridium in the faint light emitted, we hoped, from the source. Five minutes were left after I had checked the calibration.

‘David, Natasha, calibration is at maximum efficiency, we are in position to make the observation.’

‘Check, Chandra, readings in control indicate that everything is okay.’

I waited expectantly. As did I was sure everybody on the ship.

Gazing into the darkness at the target zone I could see nothing yet, not even a faint object. But I knew it was out there. I had known it was going to be there since that moment on Tau Ceti III when I had first seen evidence of the artefacts existence.

On Tau Ceti III: 13/09/2642 17:28

‘Damn it Chandra, can’t you get this thing to go any faster?’

I stifled a laugh as I gazed out of the windshield into the thick driving rain.

‘I could, but I wouldn’t advise it Tara, we are already travelling at the maximum safe speed for these conditions.’

‘Humm’, Tara mumbled, ‘I doubt there is a maximum safe speed for this crate in these conditions, won’t this rain melt this craft before we get to the dome?’

‘I don’t think that it is that bad Tara, the instruments indicate that this shower is mostly sulphuric acid mixed with methane and we are

proofed against those elements, its the odd shower of radioactive isotopes that have a negative effect on these crafts.'

'God, what inspired me to take a trip to a hole like this I will never know' said Tara as she looked out onto the flat rolling landscape of Tau Ceti III.

'Could it have been the change of scene?' I asked, luckily Tara recognised my sense of humour and laughed.

'Oh yes, compared to lazing around by beach on New Panama this is a paradise, I don't think. Working at the Jefferson Institute may not be paradise, but as a location New Panama comes close I reckon.'

I had to agree really. The Jefferson Institute for extraterrestrial archaeology was an odd place to work. Somehow the contrast between the lush landscape around it and the variety of locations we came out to on field work seemed almost too much at times. I don't suppose the founders had intended it that way, perhaps they were thinking of dense Mayan jungles hiding ruins of overgrown cities and so establishing the institute in a tropical location had been the obvious choice. Perhaps, they just liked the relaxing on the beach like Tara when they were not doing research. Whatever, the truth was that most of the digs we were involved in now were in environments which were as unlike jungles as possible. Take Tau Ceti III, a landscape worn into smooth rolling hills by endless acid rains that gusted up to hundreds of miles an hour broken only by sunny spells in which intense gamma radiation poured down from the over active gas clouds circling the planet or perhaps the delightful squalls of radioactive heavy water that, thankfully, only occasionally watered the parched landscape.

'Must have been nice once, perhaps the weather will improve again in a while.' I smiled at Tara.

'I think the forecast is bad weather for about...' she pretended to check her news pad. 'The next ten thousand years, then a clear spell.'

'Okay, I take it back it does not look like clearing up, not that that would be any improvement anyhow, but you have to admit that once the weather must have been better here.'

'I still find it hard to believe that it was ever a habitable planet.'

'I agree, I wouldn't have thought so either, but the evidence is clear, it had running water, blue skies and abundant plant and animal life only twelve thousand years ago.'

‘What happened then?’

‘I think if we knew that we would not be here.’

We lapsed into silence as the rain pelted down against the windscreen and I guided the shuttle craft along the beacon line laid down by the earlier expedition. The beacon line led from the rolling hills of the main plateau down into a complex ravine system which carved the landscape into an intricate filigree of tendril like canyons.

Nobody had expected anything to be found here. It was a routine mission to scan for mineral deposits in the previous year which had made the unexpected discovery. The planet was utterly unsuitable for habitation it seemed and had not been carefully surveyed by previous waves of ships searching for habitable, or terraformable, planets. So it had not been surveyed for a century and a half since the first waves of scout ships expanded out through this sector.

I don't think that the institute would have believed it without the scans either. Scattered in the canyons were crystalline blocks of boron that encapsulated fragments of lush plant and animal life. Like insects in amber the blocks spoke of a time on this planet when the conditions had been earth like and life had flourished in a warm tropical climate. Of course that on its own would not have been enough to get us involved, after all exo-biology was not really our field, nor yet the study of catastrophic failures of eco-systems that might account for the change from an earth like climate to the present hostile environment.

No it was the caves that had led us here. Artificial caves. So far we had no idea what they were for or who had made them. There were three main types it had turned out. Single chambers with arched entrances and low platforms running round the walls, about two meters high and ten meters square. Double storied caves, with arched roofs that were maybe twenty meters high at their apex and led back to rounded back walls. And the third type was complexes of double and single storied caves with passage ways connecting them and circular tunnels fanning out in the hills behind the main caves. The circular tunnels led to shafts which descended into unknown depths. Lift shafts it had been suggested by some joker. Scans showed no life forms, no signs of habitation and no trace of organic matter present. So it looked as if we were investigating a culture which had died out. The question on all our minds was this, who were the aliens who had

made the caves and had they caused the environmental changes that had wiped them out, or had an environmental catastrophe out of their control wiped them out.

Gradually as darkness fell we wound our way down between the eroded canyon walls towards the base camp and as we twisted and turned on the path for a moment it seemed as if I was on a back road at dusk on Brunswick. Brunswick was where I had grown up. The second planet in the Altair system. Two centuries ago when the colonists on the stasis ship 'Fair go' had come out of hibernation they had found themselves orbiting a planet with approximate 1.2 earth mass dominated by vast desert landscapes and narrow temperate zones on the Southern continents.

It was perhaps an odd coincidence that a colony ship from Australia had ended up circling a planet with more than a passing resemblance to Australia itself. As the first settlers began to establish habitations on the planet a debate had raged about what to call the planet. Somehow a contingent of people from Melbourne had managed to popularise the name Brunswick, and it stuck. So it was Brunswick I grew up on. No driving methane rains like here though, but rather dry dusty winds that blew out of the arid heart of the continent of New Australia. The Altair system had another habitable planet in it as well, which when the first probes were sent over to it was expected to be uninhabited. It had been a shock to find crashed in its single tropical equatorial continent another colony ship. The Panama, a central American Federation craft, had made an uncontrolled transition from star flight to orbital status and crashed before its crew could regain control of the craft. Luckily the majority of the colonists had survived the crash but they had only managed to survive with great difficulty in the dense jungle and had lost virtually all of their technological backup. There were a lot of complaints about the idea of automatic location of planets that came up due to this accident. Still, neither the inhabitants of New Panama nor us could do much about decisions made centuries before on earth. For me it was all stories handed down from my parents generation. My family had left Melbourne in the late 22nd century on one of the numerous stasis ships fleeing from the increasingly hostile conditions on a dreadfully overpopulated earth. It had not been until a century after colonisation that Ramdev Ram had invented the black hole drive and a wave of scout ships was sent out

in all directions to search for more habitable planets, and other colonies founded by ships from Earth. Up to that time we had contacted about seventeen other colonies at the last count. None had news from Earth that was much more recent than our own. Some had fared well, some were struggling but gradually it looked as if contact between the colonies was going to get on a steady footing.

Then in 2310 a ship popped into existence in orbit around Brunswick and began beaming out a greeting from the inhabitants of New New Zealand and asking who we were and where we were from. Once it became apparent that we were Aussies they invited us to drop over for a drink. At first it was thought that they meant for us to pop up into orbit and down a few drinks with them. Then they explained that they had developed a drive system that allowed for travel between star systems in a matter of days. Turned out that they had not developed black hole drives like us but had invented a drive system based on slipping through wormholes in hyperspace. Their drive was based on technologies we could hardly understand and did not have the capability to build easily. Their story was one of mixed fortune, their colony ship had come out of stasis in a binary star system with one inhabitable planet with an eccentric orbit that made life on it hard to say the least. It swung from winters where the oceans froze over to summers where the gravitational forces caused volcanoes to break out all over the planet. This had compelled them to try and find a way to get off the planet as quickly as possible, and one colonist, Bose, had come up with the wormhole drive just in time for them to leave before the planet went through one of its periodic phases where the oceans vaporised. They also had considerable complaints about the idea of remote sensors working out what habitable planets would be. It was only by a fluke that a sensor probe had surveyed the planet during a brief period when it appeared habitable and their stasis ship had delivered them to their questionable choice of new home.

If this all came as a shock the Bondi conference of 2311 that ensued dropped the bombshell. The Kiwis had been back to earth, partly to complain, and partly to try and get the colony ship programming altered so nobody else ended up in the mess they had found themselves in. What they had found was the remains of Earth. Still smouldering ruins in the depths of a nuclear winter. It seemed as if that soon after the first wave of colony ships had set out the tensions

on Earth had got out of control. It was not clear what had happened, there was nobody left to explain. The destruction was almost complete. But the best guess was that somehow nuclear stockpiles left over from the 20th century had all got deployed. Even the orbital stations were destroyed and the colonies on the Moon and Mars were as obliterated as the great cities of earth.

So we were orphans in the galaxy with only our joint memories of old Earth as it came to be known. During the following century using Bose drives virtually all of the colonies founded by the colony ships were located. So far though we had not made contact with any alien cultures. We had found ruins on a number of planets, indications of three alien civilisations that had got as far as nuclear technology and all perished. On two other planets we had found traces of cultures that had not made it as far as industrial revolutions before coming to an end. But nowhere had we found any alien civilisations. Dozens of ecosystems bustling with life yes, but no signs of intelligent life anywhere at all.

So Tau Ceti III seemed to be going to be the sixth dead civilisation we had found. The question was how far had they got and what had happened to them.

On Tau Ceti III: 13/09/2642 18:10

The dome of the base was a welcoming sight in the almost total darkness as I steered the shuttle down the last incline towards it.

‘Glad to see you folks, what kept you?’

The communications channel crackled a bit as the base welcomed us.

‘Slow driving through this flipping rain.’ I replied.

‘I’ll be glad to get out of this heap and down to the bar’. Said Tara with a grin as she stretched her arms up over her head and shook her blond hair from side to side.

‘Me too.’ I smiled and drove the shuttle into the parking bay and turned off the engine. The outer doors to the bay closed behind us the docking tube clamped onto the port on the shuttle. We picked up our bags and headed towards the port.

‘I’ll come back for the equipment and supplies later Tara,’ I said indicating the stack of climbing gear and protective clothing.

‘Ah yes’, Tara grinned, ‘But I think I’ll take the refreshments with us now.’

She slung a slab of beer cans onto her shoulder and with a jaunty walk swung open the hatch that led into the main base.

‘Chandra, Tara, good to see you again.’

We were greeted inside by the tall lank figure of Chuck Maguire the base co-ordinator and an old friend from Jefferson.

‘Tara, you will be on the main team investigating the tunnels, Chandra, you are to be part of the survey of the initial chambers’, he suddenly seemed to notice what Tara was carrying.

‘Ah, but I see that before you sleep you need to catch up a bit on what has been happening over the last couple of days, perhaps we could confer over a drink eh?’

We set off for the dining hall.

‘Base camp is not much I am afraid folks, living quarters for the seven of us and two labs and a control centre, that is about it I am afraid.’ He glanced back at the darkness beyond the dome. ‘Still, its a lot more homely than most of the planet.’

The dining hall was two rows of tables in a pillared hall with windows on the long walls that let you look out onto the central courtyard of the base on one side and onto the supply dumps on the other side. At one end a kitchen had been set up and a couple of people were fixing up food and another was making coffee in a percolator.

‘Let me introduce Roberto Calvi’, Chuck said leading up to the man who was just screwing on the top of the percolator, ‘He is our chief engineer and is trying to get the power into the tunnels that we will need if we are going to get down the shafts.’

Roberto raised his eyes from the stove and looked at us with a deep penetrating gaze from his brown eyes.

‘Welcome to Tau Ceti III my friends, want a coffee?’.

‘Reckon they have brought a few refreshments mate.’ Said Chuck pointing at the slab of beer.

‘Want a beer?’

‘Not tonight I think’ said Roberto and shrugged, ‘I reckon the time to celebrate with a drink will be when we work out what we have here.’ He sat down at the near table and pulled out a couple of more chairs.

‘Sit down and let me tell you the current situation in the tunnels.’

‘I will get Natasha to come over too and tell you about the chambers’ said Chuck as he picked up his communicator and input a call code.

‘But first’, said Tara, ‘Lets drink to the success of this dig, I feel certain somehow that this is going to turn out to be more than we expected.’

As I toasted to the success of the dig and the cool beer slipped down my throat I wondered if Tara’s words would turn out to be true. If I had only known what would really happen I might have acted very differently that evening.

A tall dark haired woman carrying a bundle of print outs of maps and charts came in and quickly made a bee line for us across the room.

‘Chuck, you must see the latest data it is really wonderful.’

‘One moment Natasha, Natasha this is Chandra,’ he pointed at me, ‘and Tara’, he paused, ‘Tara is an expert on potholing and’. Natasha cut him off in mid sentence.

‘And Chandra is our leading expert on ancient architecture, I know, I am familiar with your work of course.’ She inclined her head to me as if showing respect.

‘A brilliant paper on the bath complexes on Deneb Prime Mr Chandra, but’ she grinned, ‘I do not believe you told the whole story of what you suggested were ritual sanctuaries, to me the evidence seems clear that they were just changing rooms.’ For a moment I did not know what to say, the controversy over the so called ‘ritual sanctuaries’ had raged for several years, to be honest I suspected they were neither changing rooms nor ritual sanctuaries. Natasha did not wait for my reply.

‘But that is a debate for another time I think, what Mr Chandra do you make of these chambers on Tau Ceti III?’

Before I had time to reply she turned to Chuck.

‘One moment, Chuck, have you told them about the windows?’

Chuck shook his head to say not.

‘Ah wonderful, then Mr Chandra you are not yet in a position to form an opinion, look at these images.’

She spread out one of the charts on the table. It was a holographic representation of one of the double storied chambers in more detail than any image I had seen previously.

‘Do you see, here, here and here?’ She pointed at squares on the walls that alternated with pillars that supported the ribs that ran up the curved vault of the ceiling. ‘Don’t they look like windows? What do you make of it? Why carve windows in a cave?’

I smiled and quietly said, ‘Windows in a cave make no sense I agree, but windows in a building make perfect sense, what you have here Natasha is a replica carved in stone of a free standing building.’

For a moment Natasha’s blue eyes stared up at the ceiling abstractedly then she slapped her hand down on the chart.

‘Of course!’ Then the ribs in the vaulted ceiling are representations of what were structural members in the free standing building.’

I nodded and pulled from my pocket a holo projector and placing in on the table flicked on the display.

On the table now stood a model of a building with an arched roof, a curved rear end and a great rose window at the front above a set of wide doorways.

‘On the basis of the data I had before this is what the original building would have looked like, I guess I can now add windows between the columns supporting the roof structure in the naves of the hall.’

‘What do you reckon the original was made of then Chandra?’ Chuck said staring intently at the model.

‘Wood, or something very like it, some of the crystal blocks have sticks and sections of tree type trunks in them. So it seems there was wood on this planet.’

Tara frowned, ‘Then we are talking about another pre-industrial civilisation, damn, I had hoped it would be a technological culture, but wooden buildings hardly suggest that.’

I nodded, ‘Certainly, it seems most similar in fact to structures from ancient times on earth. It is actually astonishingly similar to the rock cut cave temples and monasteries that were made in India from the 2nd century BCE to the 9th century CE.’ I typed a command into the input sensor and the image changed showing a square building in the form of a courtyard with a low flat roof covering the outer ring of rooms and a single entrance way from outside leading into the central

courtyard open to the sky from where doors led into the individual chambers.

‘This is my best simulation of the original appearance of the single story chambers.’

‘So, what are we talking about here with these two types of structures, is this one later, is this one wood too?’ Chuck looked at me quizzically as if hoping I would tell him that this was a more high tech structure.

‘I am afraid not Chuck, looks to me like these were living quarters and the double story structure is some kind of meeting hall. In fact it looks as if we may have found a monastery complex.’

‘A monastery!’ Natasha threw her arms up into the air in a gesture of disbelief. ‘This we don’t need, we will have every religious nut in the sector breathing down our necks if this gets out, this is worse than ritual sanctuaries!’

‘Well, lets see what else we find, but that is my best guess at the moment.’ I paused, ‘But, as for the tunnels and shafts I have no idea of their function, unless they lead to further sanctuaries.’

The beer flowed and gradually was displaced by steaming black coffee as debate raged around the table. Chuck favoured the notion it seemed that they were fall out shelters rather than monasteries. Natasha was keen to see them as remnants of former housing and meeting complexes. Tara was apparently not at all sure what to think. To be honest we just did not have enough data to go on. After all we did not even know what the aliens who had built them looked like. We could surmise they were roughly similar in height to ourselves as the single story buildings were about two metres high but beyond that we knew nothing. For to all our frustration there was not a single image on any wall or sculpture in any chamber. The walls were blank. Perhaps they had once had paintings which had entirely disappeared, this was what I was going to investigate.

Eventually the discussion subsided and I made my way to bed wondering what I would find in the caves in the morning.

On Tau Ceti III: 14/09/2642 07:25

Hall number four was the largest by far. It was also relatively undamaged and near the base. It was the obvious choice to excavate. I was looking forward to the slow and painstaking process of

uncovering layer by layer the deposits of silt on the cave floor and sifting through the debris for any evidence left by the inhabitants of what had gone on in the caves. So on the first morning six of us gathered together and set out for the chamber. Roberto and I were going to work as a pair and Tara had teamed up with Cindy, a research scientist from Jefferson to spend the first part of the day with us before they joined Chuck and David to set off on a survey of a nearby tunnel complex.

The caves were in a semicircular valley that must have once had a river running down its centre. All were carved into the inner edge of the curve where the river had cut away the hillside into a near vertical cliff face with overhanging rocks at the top which had initially hidden the existence of the caves.

We climbed up a rough track which had been beaten by the previous expedition to this cave. From outside it was hard to see the entrance, a land slip had come down from an angle here and half covered the entrance to the chamber. It was covered in silt on the floor of the chamber, towards the entrance way to the point where you had to crouch down to get inside. Towards the back it was almost free of silt.

‘Do you think that it is airtight in here?’ Tara asked David.

‘It does not seem to have any other exits than the entrance.’ David replied shining his torch around the interior.

‘There are no indications from the first survey of it being anything other than a single chamber.’

‘If we could put a seal across the entrance we could fill it with air’, I suggested, ‘it would make excavation much easier. Roberto and David called back to base camp and a shuttle was sent up with the gear for erecting a small retaining enclosure. Then we waited to see what could be done.

‘I certainly hope that we can get it airtight, imagine we could be the first beings in twelve thousand years to stand in this chamber’.

After about half an hour we determined that it had not got any other internal exists at all and as we erected a retaining airlock started to fill it with air. It held.

We stood inside and set up a series of lights down the chamber. Roberto finished a final set of checks and announced that there was no leakage from the site and we could take off our helmets, but it would

be wise to keep them with us and be prepared to seal up our suits at short notice.

‘Reckon they must have been colour blind these beings’ Said David, everything was a uniform shade of gunmetal grey.

‘Or really liked grey perhaps.’ Cindy suggested.

Apart from the greyness the acoustics were the other thing that struck us all, our every word and action reverberated in the chamber which had an eerie total silence to it, the sound of hundreds of tons of rock above and all around us and bare stone walls.

Cindy walked down the debris slope towards the back of the hall.

‘Look here the floor is exposed and there is a circle of holes in the floor.’

We all looked at a pattern of six hexagonal sockets in a circle inset into the floor. They looked like they had been the footings for some sort of structure that had either totally decayed, perhaps of wood, or been taken away before the chamber was abandoned.

‘I think that one team should start to clear these holes to see if there are any traces of what once stood in them’ I suggested, ‘It might give us some idea of what was once here at what looks as if it should have been the central focus of the chamber.’

So Cindy and Tara started working on clearing the silt from the socket holes to investigate how deep they were and if there were traces of organic matter in them.

I walked up close to one of the window like panels and rubbing away the dust from its surface saw it had a kind of translucent coating on it in a mid shade of grey. The walls too I realised were faintly reflective with a subtle sheen to them as if of polished stone. The look and feel of them was odd, it was half as if they were polished, half as if they were coated in something. I held my sensor to the surface.

‘Odd, David take a look at these readings.’

‘Oh, a mixture of silicon particles in a fine totally regular matrix in some sort of metallic compound.’ David paused and looked at the scan again.

‘Not easy to see how a pre industrial culture could have created such a regular material.’

‘Perhaps it was a naturally occurring compound, the geology of this planet is after all fairly unusual.’ I suggested out loud. But, it bugged

me inside, it reminded me less of a natural compound and more of a microchip. But a microchip in a cave temple? It did not seem likely.

‘David you work with Chuck and see about setting up a communications link so we can use this as a base for exploring the nearby tunnel complexes.’

‘Okay Chandra’ David said and moved off towards the entrance of the chamber.

I began to slowly clean away the dust which had settled on the wall half covering the base of the window panel which was about two thirds of the way down the cave. A fairly random choice but one that meant we were all spread out about evenly down the chamber. As I worked I realised a vertical channel ran down from the panel to the floor. I checked the next panel, the same. And the next, the same again. From the bottom of each window panel a channel ran vertically down the wall to near the base. As I cleared away the silt at the bottom of the recess I noticed that the channels made a ninety degree turn just above the ground and headed back towards the left hand wall of the entrance to the chamber.

‘Roberto, can I have your help’ I called out to Roberto and David, the echo of my voice in the cave seemed to create a deep reverberating sound which echoed round and round the chamber and subsided finally into an almost imperceptible whisper. I almost believed that I could here a very faint background hum, but dismissed the idea thinking that I was just listening to the sound of our machinery operating.

‘What have you got here?’ Roberto asked looking at the channels I was examining. He ran his scanner over them.

‘Nickel steel and copper compound, nice, very conductive...’

He looked at me quizzically, ‘Are you thinking what I am thinking, an odd choice of decorative material?’

‘Certainly, and look how they all seem to run into a conduit that heads towards the left hand side of the entrance where that big pile of silt is.

‘I think we should check out what is there, don’t you?’

‘Most certainly’

So I and Roberto concentrated our efforts on clearing away the silt from inside the doorway on the left hand side.

‘Go slowly Roberto, we don’t want to disturb any material in the debris.’

I looked at each pan of debris as we cleared it away and sifted it through a fine mesh, nothing but dust and rocks, not a trace of any artefacts.

‘Looks as if the cave was empty when it was abandoned, eh?’ Roberto said, ‘A bit of a disappointment.’

‘I agree I hope we find something, or we will end up knowing about as little as we do now.’ I felt despondent, I knew I needed to be patient but still the total absence of anything but mineral debris was disappointing.

‘Nothing in the post holes either so far,’ called out Tara, ‘we have cleared the first five and they just have fine mineral sand silt in them like the rocks round here.’

She checked the scanner as she ran it over the next sample.

‘Nothing, we will try clearing the last hole and then check the centre of the circle.’

‘Chandra’ Roberto said excitedly ‘look here’ as he was clearing the next level of debris down. It was our best guess that we were at about shoulder height standing on the chamber floor when we cleared down to it. There were symbols and a design carved into the wall.

‘This is more like it,’ I said, ‘These are the first carvings we have come across’.

‘It looks like an inset panel to me in the wall’ Roberto pointed at a rounded shape that was appearing. ‘And its a different colour, its a kind of dark grey with coloured shapes set into it. Do you think it is some kind of image?’

It did not look like an image at all.

‘Perhaps it is a kind of inscription or plaque giving details about who built the cave.’ I suggested.

‘That would be interesting, especially if they show a picture of who they were!’

We laughed, to break the tension the total lack of images was so frustrating. I had begun to wonder if it was some culture with a prohibition on the representation of reality. A kind of puritan culture.

Then as we cleared the panel further suddenly it became clear what it was.

‘Extraordinary, it is a schematic floor plan of the chamber.’

We both stared at each other.

‘No images then, but a puzzle, why represent the chamber in miniature in the chamber?’

Each of the windows was marked with a small circular mark on the outer surface. The centre of the far end of the chamber was marked with a hexagonal image over which a circle was superimposed joining what appeared to be a representation of the socket holes.

‘Maybe, it was a kind of guide map to what was once in here.’ I suggested running my sensor over the surface.

‘The symbols seem faintly translucent like all the wall coatings, but in this case there seems to be a metallic-silicon substrate covered by a layer of mica glass.’

Roberto gestured at the hexagonal image.

‘Its just faintly a different colour as well, I would say it was a dull red.’

I shone a spot light onto it, it was red, all of the symbols were different subtle colours.

‘Look at these symbols’ Roberto said pointing at three vertical strips that ran down the right hand side of the panel. ‘They are green at the bottom, blue in the middle and red at the top.’ He chuckled, ‘you might almost think they were gauges showing operating levels or control sliders for some electronic mechanism.’

As I cleared to the right hand side base of the panel it became clear that all of the channels from the windows rose vertically from the floor in a kind of pattern like a printed circuit board and linked into the representation of the floor plan.

‘Well look at that’ I said, ‘If I was not in a cave temple I would say it was a switchboard.’ My joke suddenly turned sour as I cleared the left hand base of the panel.

At the very base was something which looked to all intents and purposes like a switch in a down position.

‘Not a joke, now eh Chandra?’ Said Roberto.

I began to gingerly and carefully clean the switch with a fine brush.

‘You are never going to believe this,’ Roberto called out to Tara and Cindy who were just finishing work on the circle of post holes.

‘Come and have a look, its a bloody switchboard.’

Tara started to walk over to join us and Cindy looked up from the centre of the circle where she was sifting through the last of the fine silt.

As Roberto called out to my finger brushed against the switch and with a perceptible click it suddenly clicked into an upward position.

All at once the chamber suddenly filled with multi-coloured light, rushing sounds and the terrible sound of a human scream. I and Roberto spun round in horror to see the image of Cindy standing with a look of terror on her face in the midst of a spinning glowing ball of light that was pulsating all around her. Tara reached out and grabbed her and pulled her from the centre of the glowing orb.

We all rushed over. Cindy was looking down at her body, she was totally untouched.

‘Its a hologram!’ Tara cried.

‘What is it?’ Cindy stared in astonishment at the spot where she had stood a moment before. It was now obvious that the ‘post holes’ were actually the sources for a holographic projector. What they were projecting was a constantly changing spinning circular image that moment by moment phased through different hues and shades of the spectrum and the shape of which curved and spun into new forms. Almost like a string spinning at high speed and changing from one kind of sine wave to another in a chaotic motion.

‘Certainly not a pre-industrial culture then.’ Said Roberto.

‘Its so beautiful’ Tara said in awe, ‘a kind of abstract symphony of light.’

‘But as abstract as the bare walls were.’ I said not able to hide my disappointment. I had somehow felt the central focus of the chamber should reveal something central to the ancient aliens culture. Perhaps an image of one of their gods. But instead it was a glowing abstract wonder.

‘Err, folks I don’t want to worry you’, David said breaking into our reverie, ‘But perhaps you should take a look around you too.’

David had looked away from the central image.

All around us a wonder was revealed. The previously grey surfaces were covered in vivid images in red, gold, blue and ochre earth colours of rows and rows of human like figures, mostly in yellow robes, and all bowing towards the central spinning orb of light.

We were all dumbfounded, in a moment from knowing nothing about the ancient aliens we were confronted by a startling and confusing wealth of knowledge.

‘But, but they are human!’ Roberto cried, ‘Or at least they look pretty close to being human.’

‘Humanoid, I agree, said Cindy, but that golden complexion is either artistic licence or not a skin colour I have ever seen.’

‘Also look at their faces, their eyebrows are a single line, and look at their arms!’ Tara pointed to how their arms came down to their knees in some of the images.

‘Human like then might be the first conclusion folks,’ said Roberto. ‘Also I notice that one over there has his tongue out and he seems to be licking the top of his head with it, I have never met anybody who can do that.’

Cindy giggled, ‘The naked ones over there also seem to have some rather odd features to their err... how shall I say private parts?’

I stared at the image of a group of five naked figures half way down one wall standing erect and with their hands at their sides. Each was clearly shown with what appeared to be a kind of sheath around their penises that looked like it was part of their bodies. All the images were astonishingly life like, photographic in their quality and all were gazing with a rapt expression of wonder on their faces at the glowing orb of light. The yellow robed figures were all holding up their hands together with the palms touching in front of their chests. I knew this image from somewhere and was wracking my brain to remember where I had seen something like it before when.

Then I noticed that the window panels now contained moving images.

‘My God! The windows are showing moving holographic images!’

Meanwhile, Roberto, who was back at the control panel, was studying the lights that now pulsed across its surface.

‘If I am not mistaken these bars of fluctuating lights represent energy flows and they are indicating that this chamber is operating in a blue zone between a green and a red area on each display. Looks a lot as if this whole thing is in perfect working order and with a fully functioning energy supply.’

Like children suddenly let loose in a toy shop we all rushed to the window displays. Each window was on a short loop showing different

scenes. Harvests, markets, wildlife, forests, roads, what appeared to be an airport.

I watched a loop in which women in colourful dresses were planting green shoots in flooded fields and then like a time lapse film the fields became seas of brilliant green plants under cloudy skies and then as the sky cleared the fields turned golden and the film slowed down to show the women coming out and harvesting the fields and drying the plants in the sun on the now dry fields before carrying away the sheaves of plants. Then men came and flooded the fields and ploughed them using teams of animals that looked not unlike buffaloes. Then the whole scene started repeating.

‘I think they grew a crop like rice’ I said to Cindy who was standing next to me watching the next window’s display. ‘And they had a family life too.’ Said Cindy, ‘Look, my window shows how a pair of people who are doing some sort of ceremony and then after a while there is another couple with a baby.’ She paused, then shook her head in disbelief, ‘No its the same couple, I recognise a kind of birth mark or tattoo on the woman’s hand. It must be a representation of some sort of marriage and then having a child.’

‘Um, let me have a look can you tell anything about how long it took?’

I began watching intently, I got a glimpse of a couple dressed in white clothes standing in the doorway of a courtyard with brilliant decorations inside the courtyard. Then I was distracted by a cry.

Tara cried out in astonishment from the very back of the chamber.

‘You had better all come and look at this, its a god dam space ship!’

We all rushed to the back and stood staring up at the end screen in the chamber. It showed a scene quite unlike those we had looked at so far.

A city skyline was at the back of the image. Skyscrapers and towers clustered along with lower buildings at the edges of the image. Some of the buildings looked complete others seemed broken off jaggedly part of the way up the constructions and here and there what looked like plumes of smoke were rising over quarters of the city. In the foreground was a construction site with people scurrying in all directions and erecting gantries and digging deep excavations. Gradually teams of people erected a cylindrical structure which seemed to tower over the people, if the people were human size it

would have had to have been several hundred feet high. Then using giant cranes they lowered the structure into one of the pits which had been excavated and all the machinery in the field was pulled back. Then a group of yellow robed figures marched across the now empty field and descended into the pit in the ground.

‘Well it looked like a space ship’ Tara said disappointedly, ‘God knows what it really was.’

‘Perhaps it was a burial rite,’ I suggested.

‘Mighty odd burial it strikes me, a great waste of effort...’ Roberto started to say as the whole chamber around us started to fill with a rumbling sound. We looked around with concern wondering what was about to happen.

Then I noticed that the rumbling was mirroring the appearance of smoke and fumes from the pit in the image.

‘I think it is okay folks, the sounds look like they are part of the sound track for this display.’ I said hoping my words would turn out to be true.

Then all of a sudden the smoke on the display was mixed with flames and ever so slowly at first the tip of the cylinder began to emerge from the pit.

‘It was a rocket’ I muttered under my breath.

The rocket lifted from the pit and climbed up into the sky on a column of flame. Eventually it disappeared from the image. After a few moments the scene began to repeat again.

‘Folks,’ said Roberto, ‘I think that there are two possibilities, maybe that was a picture of a space launch, or maybe of launching a nuclear ballistic missile.’

We all fell silent, thinking of the wasteland that covered the planet and the rain of radioactive water that fell all too often onto the barren rocks outside.

We were left with a peculiar mix of elation and despondency after we watched the rocket launching sequence. Somehow it reminded all of us of films of the launching of the first rockets on earth in the second world war.

In an almost mechanical and automatic mode we had slipped into setting up recording equipment and filming the sequences in each window and the task of measuring up all the dimensions of the chamber and documenting exactly what we were looking at. None of

us felt much enthusiasm as we dug away the silt from the front of the cave and transported it outside. Nor yet did we find anything else of note.

The last thing we did for the day was stand in the entrance and turn the switch down. Once again the grey silence of the rocks asserted themselves and as we left we felt that once again the weight of time had settled down into the chamber as if the lights and images had just been a phantasm of our imaginations.

My sleep that night was filled with fitful images of courtyards full of yellow robed figures and the ominous sounds of giant rockets arcing up into the sky above the skylines of cities.

On Tau Ceti III: 15/09/2642 06:50

‘Roberto, good morning, is the coffee brewing yet?’

I slid down into a seat by the table as I called over to Roberto who was standing by the stove.

‘Certainly is, did you sleep okay Chandra?’

Roberto walked over to me with the coffee pot and two tiny cups. The hot steamy smell of espresso filled my nose as he poured me a cup. He leaned over the table and looked intently at me.

‘You couldn’t sleep well either eh?’

‘No, but at least one thing came to me in my dreams last night, the figures in the chamber are Buddhist monks, but that’s why I couldn’t sleep, what are Buddhist monks doing on this planet?’

‘What are humanoids doing on this planet at all, that is what puzzles me.’

Roberto sipped on his coffee and slid his pad over to me. On it was a set of equations.

‘This is my projections for the kind of power needed to lift a rocket like the one in the main sequence, it could be a solid fuel chemical drive, or a liquid propellant system, both were common in early rockets, but the way it lifted slowly out of the pit, and the apparent mass of it suggests to me more an orbital launcher than an inter continental ballistic missile.

‘If you are right then that is a blessing.’

‘On the other hand, what has kept me up is wondering how a power source which has been running for twelve thousand years can still be running. It seems to me that it must be a nuclear power plant. All of

the industrial cultures we have discovered so far discovered nuclear power, not to mention ourselves.’

He twisted round in his seat and dropped his head into both his hands and scowled at a second set of equations.

‘Where is the bloody power plant? How come it is still working, and what has been happening to the energy it has been generating all this time?’

I nodded my head, suddenly I got his point.

‘It must have been dissipating its energy somehow or it would have overloaded, is that what you are saying?’

‘Basically, yes.’

‘So what do you reckon, are we looking for some kind of process which has been using the energy all this time, and if so what?’

Roberto shook his head, ‘I was hoping you might tell me as you are the archaeologist, I am the engineer after all.’

‘To be honest,’ I shook my head, ‘at this point your guess is as good as mine.’

Cindy came in and sat down at the table. Nibbling on a piece of toast held delicately in one hand and sipping on a beaker of some sort of herb tea in her other hand she looked as fresh as we both looked jaded.

‘You two have been up all night worrying eh?’

‘Well, not exactly all night’ I said, ‘And what about you?’

‘Its odd, I felt kind of peaceful, I think it was the shock of finding myself in the midst of that weird hologram, it drained all the energy from me so to speak. I slept like a baby.’

‘Probably a natural reaction to the shock’ I suggested.

‘That’s what the doctor said too when I saw him last night to expect. He couldn’t see anything wrong with me.’

Neither could I, she was tall with wavy blond hair and an infectious grin that seemed to give an sense of animation to her face. She noticed me staring at her and smiled back at me.

‘Well guys, I think that it is clear we need to explore the tunnels now, the living quarters can wait as far as I am concerned.’

‘I agree’ said Roberto, ‘It is my suspicion that the answer to the mystery we are exploring here must be in the tunnels.’

The door swung open and David and Chuck came in. They were involved in an agitated conversation.

‘The windows must be showing different periods.’ David waved his right hand through the air as if to assert what he was saying must be true.

‘How can you be sure of that? Perhaps they are different geographic areas?’

Chuck replied holding both palms up in a shrug.

‘The sequence is the thing Chuck, the progression around the chamber.’ David, glanced over at us and called out.

‘Maybe you three can help us sort out what is happening here.’

They both sat down at the table and David pushed all of our breakfast things aside without even asking us if it was okay and unrolled a diagram of the chamber.

I cradled the last dregs of my coffee in my cup as he spoke.

‘Look, I made up this plan last night when I got back, I have tried to indicate levels of technological attainment in each window. What I think we have here is not a temple’ He frowned at me, as if daring me to assert such a notion. ‘But, a museum.’

I opened my eyes wide and looked at the chart.

‘See it starts near the door with the scenes we thought yesterday were the wildlife parks, no technology at all. Then the scenes start to include people in the forest offering food to the animals. By this point.’ He indicated the scene of rice fields I had looked at. ‘There are people practising agriculture, but no sign of any technology, just animal’s pulling wheeled vehicles and ploughs.’

‘But here,’ he slammed his hand down on the table about two thirds of the way along the chamber towards its back. ‘There is the first depiction of a vehicle without any animals pulling it moving along in a city street.’ He moved his finger along more gingerly to the next window but one. ‘While here the vehicles are apparently moving at high speed on broad roads out in the country, kind of like a free way in fact.’

‘I agree’ I said, ‘But aren’t they still ploughing the fields the same in that image as in the other image?’

‘No, that’s the point, Chuck and I have just watched the recording of that window again and it looks as if the fields are being ploughed using self powered ploughs.’

‘I don’t agree’ Chuck chipped in. ‘To me it looks as if the men are just pushing the ploughs’.

‘Eh, pushing a plough? Chuck have you ever tried to do that?’

‘Nope.’

I looked at Chuck he was a strongly built muscular man.

‘Chuck even you couldn’t push a plough, if there are no animals pulling the ploughs only men and ploughs then I am confident it has to be a motorised plough.’

David, threw up his hands as if in despair.

‘Will you two stop this ploughing nonsense? Why not consider the next window along instead, its a god damn airport for Christ’s sake and has to represent a higher level of technological achievement.’

‘Okay David, I certainly take that on board, looks fairly conclusive to me.’

Chuck seemed to barely contain a growl under his breath as I agreed with David.

‘Well, what about the other side of the chamber then? How does that fit in?’ Chimed in Cindy. ‘I see you have not labelled it at all, why not?’

David shifted uneasily in his seat. ‘Well because there is no technology apparent in any of the images. They are all of the robed figures doing various things none of which make any sense to me.’

‘I think I can help there’ I said and got their attention.

‘The scenes are all apparently of monastic life, there are sequences of a man sitting under a tree and teaching to five other men, there are sequences of monks chanting, scenes of monks teaching in halls like the chamber we explored yesterday, scenes of monks on alms rounds with their bowls and of them eating sitting in long rows in halls.’

I paused.

‘Also there are signs of some technological variation. I noted then reviewing the images before I slept last night.’ I switched on a display panel set into the table and swept away Chucks ground plan of the chamber.

‘Look, in all the scenes the monks are dressed identically, but there are changes in the buildings. In some images the buildings are made of what looks like wood and plaster construction, you can even see rounded corners, and look there are what look like oil lamps in the corners of some rooms.’ I switched the display to another sequence. ‘In this the monks seem to be doing a similar chanting ritual but the building looks more regular in its construction and the roof span is

greater, like they had better construction materials.’ I paused the display, ‘And if its technology we are interested in then I think that this shows a variation.’ I pointed at what looked like a set of square and round symbols on the wall by a door. ‘Those could just be designs, or they could be light switches, I can’t prove it either way, but I can point out you cannot see any oil lamps in this sequence.’ I paused and checked the positions of the sequences.

‘Well, well, David that fits your theory just fine, the possible light switches are nearer the back than the oil lamps.’

‘What you have then,’ Cindy sat up straight and brushed back her hair as she said ‘Is one side of the chamber about lay life and one side about monastic life, both leading from earlier to later sequences.’

‘Both ending up with the rocket.’ Chuck said standing up and straightening his jacket. ‘What we need to do if you are all in agreement is to find out if the rocket is the end of the story or the tunnels reveal anything further.’

The weather was foul outside, the winds were gusting at hundreds of miles an hour and we were glad to for the warmth and security of the shuttle as it lumbered down the valley to another location where a group of more decayed chambers lay exposed to the wild conditions.

‘Chandra, previous surveys showed that this complex has a main hall like the one we investigated yesterday, but in addition there are the single story chambers and an entrance to a tunnel that led back into the hillside.’

‘Can we pressurise this one too?’ Cindy asked.

Chuck shrugged, ‘Doesn’t look likely the entrance is a jagged cavern now and there is no telling whether there are other exits.’ He glanced up from the wheel at Cindy.

‘Looks as if we will need to suit up for this one.’

‘What about equipment sledges will they be possible to get into the tunnel?’ I asked wondering what we could carry with us.

‘Maybe, perhaps we should make an initial survey on foot and then come back for the sleds if it turns out we can get the into the tunnel.’

We pulled up half in and half out of the rough opening that marked the site of the tunnel entrance and all scrambled into our suits. I spent half my time helping David to suit up who had some problems getting the seals on his suit to work properly.

‘Come on guys.’ Cindy said who was already suited up. ‘Don’t dawdle.’

I quickly pulled on my helmet and checked my communications system and said.

‘Okay, I’m ready.’

We went out via the airlock and the moment the outer hatch opened felt the pressure of the winds trying to push us from side to side as they gusted round the rock face. Basically it was not too bad though and the only precaution we took was to stretch a guide rope out from the shuttle as we trudged into the lee of the wind and entered the mouth of the tunnel. To be honest it was not much darker inside the tunnel than it had been outside initially. All we could see was a cone of vision cast by the lamps mounted in our helmets.

The tunnel was featureless. If it had ever had a formal entrance it had been eroded away or lost in a rock fall. It was circular and featureless. I went up close to the surface and looked at it. No traces of translucence greeted my eyes, just smooth carved rock. After a few steps into the tunnel the wind and murk of the driving rain all seemed to drop away completely. As we walked forward we paid out the guide line behind us.

‘That’s it folks.’ David said dropping the rope to the ground. ‘How are we going to fix this thing down?’

‘Try a piton.’ Tara suggested. David took out the piton gun and pointed it at the tunnel floor. He pressed the activation trigger and jumped back as the piton bounced off the floor and ricocheted off the wall.

‘Whoops, that does not look as if it will work. Perhaps, we can weigh it down with something.’

Chuck went back and got a rock from near the entrance and we put it down on the end of the rope.

‘So we will know we are a hundred metres from the entrance when we get back to this point.’ Chuck said as he carefully positioned the rock.

‘Also we had better take more care with the piton gun in future, its dangerous, and these tunnel surfaces are hard.

‘Also machine made I think.’ I said. ‘They are too regular to be carved by hand, they must have had a kind of boring machine to make the tunnel.

‘Okay lets see how far it goes.’ Cindy said as she pressed ahead. We all walked forward for a few minutes until all of a sudden the tunnel seemed to open up and we found ourselves standing at the entrance to a round chamber about ten metres wide and with a domed roof.

‘Careful now, check the floor, some of these tunnels have pits in the ground according to some survey data.’ Chuck said shining his spot lamp into the centre of the chamber. It was apparently flat and featureless and without any apparent pit in the centre.

‘Looks okay this time.’

‘But its a dead end then, lets go back.’ Tara said.

‘Not so fast.’ I said plying my light on the walls of the chamber. ‘We need to check carefully and see why they might have made a blank chamber at the end of this tunnel.’

‘Never finished the project?’ Cindy suggested as she started to walk around the right side of the chamber.

I concentrated my attention on the left side of the entrance. The same location as the control panel in the last chamber. I was about to give up when I realised that perhaps I should not be looking in the chamber but in the tunnel. So I turned around and stood in the entrance to the chamber. Sure enough there was another panel.

‘All of you get over here, there is another control panel.’

Everybody ceased investigating the cave and joined me at the chamber entrance.

‘I don’t want any of you standing in the location of another blooming hologram if this works like the last one.’ I said.

‘This tunnel entrance is much more damaged than the last though, its systems may not be functioning.’

I ran my scanner over the control panel. It had only three symbols, a bar at the top, a square below it and a circle at the bottom.

‘Which one should I press do you reckon?’

We all looked at each other hoping not to be the first one to make the choice.

‘Try the bottom one, it worked the first time.’ Roberto suggested.

I pressed it and waited a moment. Nothing happened.

‘Okay, try the middle one then.’ Tara suggested.

I did. Nothing again.

‘Go on press the bloody top one then.’ Cindy said leaning over ‘Oh, I will do it myself.’

As she pressed it a puff of dust rose in the centre of the chamber and the central portion slowly rose up and revealed a kind of cylindrical plug about three metres round, a bit higher than a person and with an opening facing us. We checked the floor between us and the structure. It was as clear and featureless as before.

‘What is it?’ David said.

‘Shall we investigate?’ I said. ‘Without a closer look it is hard to say.’

We all walked over and around the object. Grey, translucent, but without any images on its exterior. What we could see of the interior also looked featureless. We crowded into it and started to carefully check the surface. Cindy was standing to the left of the door this time.

‘Hey, its got the same three symbols here.’ She said pointing her finger at a panel on the wall and as if to emphasise her point she jabbed her finger at the display and touched the square in the centre of the panel.

‘Don’t do that...’ I cried out as I saw her doing it, but it was too late.

The entrance way suddenly closed with doors that slid in from the sides in a moment and a light came on in the interior of the chamber.

‘Oops... I appear to have done something, but what?’ Cindy said looking at me.

‘You pressed the down button I think.’ I replied.

As if confirming my theory we suddenly felt the floor seem to drop beneath us and we began descending.

‘Roberto, any idea how fast we are going?’ Chuck asked.

‘Not really possible to say, but it feels quite rapid, to feel the floor drop away like that suggests a fairly rapid descent.’

‘I am not sure if I trust lifts on alien planets that have not been used for millennia.’ Tara’s voice had a brittle edge to it as she stared around at the walls of the lift.

‘I agree.’ Chuck said. ‘But the chamber yesterday was in perfect working order so it seems these people built things to last.’

‘Including the power supply.’ Muttered Roberto.

‘The walls have taken on an odd pattern too.’ I commented looking at a kind of vertical striation that had appeared in them.

‘I think they are transparent and we are looking at the rock walls of the lift shaft.’ Cindy said with excitement in her voice.

‘I wonder if we will see anything on the way down like from a glass walled lift in a fancy hotel?’

‘An odd, alien hotel that is.’ I replied.

All of a sudden the grey walls were replaced by brilliant blue light flooding in and for a moment we could not see anything. Then as our eyes adjusted we stared dumb struck at the vista before us.

We were descending into a vast horizontal cylindrical chamber about a kilometre wide and high. It stretched out in the distance before and behind us apparently to infinity.

‘So this is where the power is going’. Yelled Roberto as he gleefully stared out.

‘What are those structures?’ Chuck stuttered a bit as he pointed out in one direction. At rows of gantries, towers and cranes that were clustered around a complex of buildings.

Roberto smiled. ‘I reckon we have just found the next generation of shipyards from the one in the sequence we saw yesterday.’

‘Yes, look over there.’ With a thrill in her voice Cindy pointed in the opposite direction at a similar cluster of buildings but with a rocket ship at its centre.

Before we could get a good look the lift descended too low and as suddenly as it had started it came to a halt and the doors slid open.

In an irony I can not quite understand there then followed just the sort of electronic ‘ping’ sound that I had heard in many other lifts I have been in.

Chuck suddenly spoke loudly over the comms channel to us all.

‘By the power vested in me as base co-ordinator I am now taking over as your commanding officer. The protocols for possible alien contact are quite clear and I don’t want anybody doing anything now without my order, is that understood?’

‘Not pressing any more buttons do you mean? Cindy grinned.

‘Exactly.’ Chuck turned and looked at us all.

‘Look, I am just saying that this may be first contact with aliens so lets be careful.’

‘I concur with Chuck, lets be careful. Although I doubt there is anybody here, surely they would be coming up to meet us by now. After all with this level of technology they could have detected our presence on the surface easily you would think.’

‘Should we step out of the lift?’ Tara said quizzically.

‘No lets see what we can survey from here first.’ Chuck replied. ‘Nobody is to press any buttons or leave the lift without my direct order, copy?’

‘Copy’ we all replied. Lets be honest, we were all civilians, but we knew that were now way out of our depth. Excavating ruins is one thing, using alien lifts is another.

‘Either its Sunday or there is nobody home.’ Tara said as we stood and surveyed the scene around us.

We were at the centre of a sort of plaza. All around it there were two storey buildings with colonnades on their ground floors and balconies on their upper floors. The plaza was deserted. In the distance we could see the tower and crane complexes we had seen as we descended. The light was coming from a strip that ran down the centre of the arched ceiling of the chamber.

‘The light strips have gaps in them.’ David pointed out. ‘I wonder why.’

Roberto pointed to the first gap in the lighting.

‘Either its a coincidence or its above the first ship yard that the first gap in the lighting takes place.’

I used my visor’s sensor array to zoom in on the area.

‘Its a regular break, its circular.’

‘Its a hatch.’ Roberto said. ‘I would bet my bottom dollar on it.’

‘After all why build rockets underground if there is no way to get them to the surface, and this lift is not big enough to get a rocket into.’

‘The exit tunnels must be blocked or we would have seen them from orbital surveys.’

‘Tara, what readings does your suit have for the atmosphere in here?’

‘Readings indicate that it is roughly like an earth atmosphere. A mixture of Carbon Dioxide, nitrogen and oxygen with traces of other gases.’

‘Check, copy that Tara, I have the same readings on my sensors.’ Chuck replied. ‘But don’t crack open your suits, who never know what kind of things might be in this atmosphere.’

‘Chuck, look at the Carbon Dioxide levels.’ I said. ‘They are very low, I reckon that there is no plant life here active.’

We looked around the plaza again and realised that there were a number of circular areas which appeared to be covered in rough earth.

Finally I spotted in one of them the remnants of what looked like a tree trunk.

‘I think that the plants have all died.’

‘Perhaps somebody forgot to water them.’ David suggested.

‘Perhaps the gardeners have all gone and the irrigation system has stopped working.’ I suggested.

‘I want to investigate this area.’ Cindy said turning towards the door.

‘Think what we might find.’

‘And think of the trouble we might get in, no I will not allow it.’ Chuck said in an authoritative tone of voice. ‘This is supposed to be an initial reconnaissance.’

‘Agreed’ virtually in one voice we all seconded what Chuck had said.

‘Okay folks it does not look as if anybody is coming to greet us, our suit monitors have recorded everything we have seen. I suggest we press the up button again and go back, do you all agree.’

‘Agreed’ we all chimed in.

Chuck was moving towards the control panel but before he could reach it we heard the ‘ping’ sound again over our comms channel and the as the doors closed the bottom circle lit up.

‘I didn’t do anything this time.’ Cindy said pouting at Chuck. ‘You can’t blame me this time.’

‘Okay lets see what happens this time, and I am going to press the up button as soon as the lift stops again this time.’ Chuck said dourly.

Again we were falling at speed down the shaft past grey rock walls. This time the descent was much longer and after several minutes we came out of the tunnel.

This time into darkness and the lift pulled up to a halt a moment later and its doors opened on a much smaller circular area. Not much bigger than the initial landing stage.

For a moment as we looked out we could not see anything, then as we adjusted to the darkness we saw what appeared to be stars. It was no night sky I had ever seen. As my suit sensors surveyed the stars they reported that initial observation did not match any known location in human space.

‘Odd place to build an observatory deep in the ground.’ Tara said.

‘Odd looking place to, the stars seem to be all around us.’ Cindy said.

‘Nobody get out this time,’ Chuck said, then added, ‘Please.’

Cindy who was standing near the door suddenly looked down at the ground around us.

‘Its curving down all around us. Like the surface of a sphere.’

She was right the appearance of a flat circle had been an illusion we were standing on the surface of a dome, or a sphere.

‘I won’t go out’ She said and then to my horror she added.

‘But I will just lean out and see what I can see a bit.’

Before anybody could stop her she leaned out of the door and then said. ‘Oh go on one step can’t hurt’ And stepped outside.

She was wrong it turned out, very wrong.

As she moved out of the door a green line of light seemed to intersect with her body as if she was stepping through a hitherto invisible barrier. As it happened she simply collapsed in a heap on the ground.

‘Don’t do anything.’ Chuck shouted. ‘Cindy, can you hear me?’

There was no response.

Tara suddenly picked her climbing rope off her pack, made a loop at the end and tossed the end out the door. It also went through the green light barrier and ended up around Cindy’s foot. Tara and Chuck pulled on it and dragged Cindy back into the lift. I hit the top button without even waiting for Chuck’s command.

‘Hit the up button Chandra, oh, you have done it already.’

As the lift sped up the shaft we gathered around Cindy, her suit’s life signs were all blank. All of the energy readings on her suit were blank and her eyes were as blank as the dials on her suit.

We stared dumbfounded at her prone form at the centre of the lift. David, every observant was the first to point out that we were taking longer to get back up than it had taken to get down. That things were going very wrong was even more apparent when very slowly the lift emerged onto the plaza.

It was now almost dark like dusk on the plaza. The ‘ping’ of the doors was also fainter and as they slid open, and they stopped while still half way open.

‘Chandra, David, Roberto, Tara, I think we have a problem. The lift is malfunctioning.’ Chuck said.

Tara, slipped the catches on Cindy's helmet and her own and attempted mouth to mouth resuscitation. 'Cindy is dead.' She sobbed looking up at us. 'No trace of life signs, no trace of breathing.'

'I think the power drain of whatever we did, or perhaps of whatever killed Cindy, has caused a power failure.' Said Roberto, and he shrugged. 'So maybe this twelve thousand year old power plant is not so reliable after all.'

'And we are stuck in an underground chamber hundreds of feet from the surface.' I added.

'This is not' I thought to myself 'turning out the way I expected'.

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'Lets take stock, what are options, any suggestions?' Chuck said glancing round the lift at us.

'Call for help.' Tara suggested.

'I have tried' Chuck replied, 'The rocks above us are blocking the signals, so what next?'

'Find the power plant and get it back on line, then take the lift up.' Roberto suggested, then looked out at the tunnel stretching off into the distance. 'But, I have to admit I have no idea where we would start looking.'

'Okay, that is an option' Chuck nodded, 'Anything else?'

'Look around for any other way out to begin with, perhaps there are stairs.'

'David, that is not a bad idea, plus it might put us on the track of the power plant if we can find it.' Chuck said, then paused. 'Lets do this methodically guys, first check around the lift carefully.'

I stepped out and looked around, the square seemed even bigger than before in the fading light. Then I looked up trying to see the lights and called out.

'Chuck, I think there are stairs out.' I said pointing out the side of the transparent lattice work structure of the lift shaft that stretched up into the heights above us.

'Hum, not exactly stairs Chandra, more a ladder.'

'Look' Tara said shining a light onto the structure above us 'It must be intended for emergency maintenance crews to get access to the lift, but the designers must have had a screw loose there don't seem to be any stages, just a ladder without any breaks.'

‘Its far too far to climb’ Roberto, sighed, ‘How can we climb up a ladder that is at least a kilometre to the roof of the chamber, let alone from there to the surface.’

‘I think its a problem too, we could fall off at any time.’

‘I don’t think that is a problem that should stop us.’ Tara said and pulled her supply of climbing rope off her back. ‘We came equipped for climbing after all, I for one did not expect a lift, and in a way it would be better to be under our own power.’

‘What about Cindy?’ I said staring at her figure lying in the lift.

‘We will just have to carry her body if we can, otherwise...’ Chuck grimaced.

‘No, I do not agree, we must get the power on’ Roberto said. ‘I have no intention of climbing out, come on lets search the square, maybe there are back up systems we can turn on.’

‘Okay, lets start by checking out the square, Roberto, David, you go straight ahead, Tara, you come with me we will head towards the buildings behind the tree that Chandra spotted. Chandra, you stay here and if by chance the power comes on, don’t let the lift leave without us.’

The two groups set off across the open square. I watched Tara and Chuck walking towards the remains of the tree. Something caught my eye, it was different but I couldn’t put my finger on it. What had changed? The tree was a bare stump with broken boughs as before, maybe it was the growing darkness changing the shadows in the building. Mind you it was hard to see the colonnade as clearly as before due to the breeze blowing the dust from the tree’s base across my field of vision.

‘Chandra’ Roberto’s voice came over the comm link. ‘It is further than I thought to the edge of the square in this direction. There also does not seem to be any ways in which the buildings differ, any ideas of what direction to go.’

‘I don’t think I have a clue, but the centre of the side of the square would be a focus, but then the corners might be where the service facilities were located.’

Tara’s voice chipped in, ‘I don’t know but I would not head in this direction, its starting to smell over here like chlorine in a swimming pool.’ Tara still had her suit open from having tried to revive Cindy.

‘Tara!’ I cried out and saw her turning round and looking back at me as they approached the tree. ‘Close your suit up, heaven knows what you are breathing.’

I looked at her again, her feet were hidden now by the shifting clouds of dust.

Suddenly I understood, and looking up confirmed my fears.

‘All of you, Chandra here, you had better get back here, we don’t have time to find a power plant. We are going to have to start leaving straight away. Look above us now, see a change?’

‘Its getting darker and there are clouds,’ Chuck said, ‘so, your point?’

‘There was no wind when we first came into this chamber, there is a breeze now, there were no clouds, now there are, and Tara smelt chlorine, there was none in the air when we were here before.’

‘Chandra, we are on our way back,’ Roberto said, ‘I have just checked the pressure from before, and now, its fallen...it’s falling steadily.’

‘I don’t see the problem’ Tara said, ‘So the pressure is dropping perhaps it is just a night phase in the cycle of this place.’

‘Chuck, you and Tara come back right now, its no night phase, there was no evidence of any drifting dust when we came before, or chlorine. The chamber must be de-pressurising and the atmosphere in here has started to mix with the planet surface atmosphere. I don’t want to be in here when the acid rains from the surface start to kick in here. God knows what will happen.’

‘Also that will wreck any power plant if it is still repairable.’ Roberto said as he and David came trudging back to the base of the ladder. ‘Why though is it happening now?’ He glanced up, ‘is it something we did?’

‘Time to worry about that later’ Chuck said as he darted into the lift and came out carrying Cindy’s body over his shoulder. ‘Let’s get moving.’

‘We all rope ourselves together and as I’ll go first and secure a rope for the section.’ Tara said fixing the rope to her climbing harness and sizing us all up, ‘David, you are next in the sequence, when you get up behind me then you clip the rope onto the ladder and I will start the next section.’

‘What about us?’ I asked.

‘I will be in the centre and Roberto will be behind me, Chandra you bring up the rear.’ Chuck barked out as Tara began the climb.

‘Why that order?’ Roberto asked, ‘Executive decision.’ Replied Chuck.

‘In other words,’ I thought to myself ‘He has no idea but he has got to get us going.’

So we began to climb. It was hard work and nobody talked more than needed. As we climbed the shock of what had happened gradually began to set in for me. Perhaps it was watching Chuck climbing with Cindy’s body draped over his shoulder to. ‘God what have we got ourselves into’ I said silently under my breath as I reached out and pulled myself up another rung on the ladder.

‘Tara here guys, just thought I would tell you I think I was wrong, I can make out what looks like it might be a landing stage of some sort up ahead about another hundred metres. We will pause for a moment there if it is.’

I kept on climbing on automatic and after a while found myself staring at Tara who was grinning at me through her visor and helped pull me up through a hatchway onto the platform.

We were about half way up the cylinder it looked to me. Gone was the brilliant blue light of our downward journey. The gloom was shot through now with glints of green that were spiralling out from up above us. The plaza below us was now lost in the darkness and I could only faintly make out the gantries and towers on one side of us.

‘Lets press on folks’ Chuck said in a low growl, ‘We need to get out of here and the sightseeing somehow does not appeal to me at the moment.’

Nobody said anything. I looked at Tara climbing up the ladder it was as if she were a bee climbing into a flower the way her form was silhouetted against the tendrils of cloud which looked like petals curling round to me.

I shook my head to break my reverie and followed up the ladder behind Roberto. The climb seemed to have become interminable and I was hardly aware of what I was doing when.

‘Stop a moment’ David called out.

We all stopped.

‘Look off to the right, can you see anything?’

Roberto sighed and said ‘looks like thunder clouds developing, I wonder...’

Chuck broke in.

‘No time to wonder about that guys, lets move again.’

The rungs of the ladder seemed cold and almost slippery to me now as we climbed and I found I had to pay attention to each hand hold, mindfully, moment by moment. The rungs of the ladder became a kind of thread onto which I fixed my attention. One moment I found myself having wandered off and thinking about the petal like tendrils of gasses circling round like an image of a spiral galaxy, again the rungs of the ladder, another moment I found myself thinking of the image of the lift rising like a plug out of the far at the start of the journey. The rungs of the ladder, colder and colder they seemed to my tired hands.

‘Oh shit, we pulled the plug’ I said half to myself.

‘Copy that Chandra’ Chuck said, ‘What are you saying, something about a slug?’

I spoke up more clearly ‘take care folks the rungs are getting colder and slippery and its going to get worse.’

‘How can you tell?’ Tara said sounding like she was totally caught up in her climbing.

‘When we called the lift we broke the seal that kept the outer atmosphere from the inner atmosphere. It must be an accident that it has acted as an airlock all this time. It was never meant to I think. I imagine the atmosphere in here and on the surface was the same 12 thousand years ago. They never would have realised they needed an airlock.’

‘They didn’t’ Roberto chuckled, ‘we did, but we didn’t realise.’

Chuck broke in.

‘Roberto, quiet, let Chandra speak, Chandra why is it going to get colder?’

‘As the air thins it is cooling and residual moisture is settling out onto the ladder, like condensation of the surface of a cold bottle. It should not be a problem, the suits can handle the temperatures, but it might get icy later and that could be really slippery.’

‘Good thinking Chandra, take care all of you. Tara, how far to the top of the chamber?’ Chuck said with a hint of anticipation in his voice.

‘Its getting hard to say Chuck, the clouds up ahead are getting thicker moment by moment and I can’t see the roof any longer.’

‘Estimate?’

‘Should be soon, I hope.’

‘Any of you beginning to feel the breeze?’ David broke in.

‘Yes, it seems to be picking up a bit now’ Tara replied.

‘Lets, hope it not going to get too windy.’ I said. ‘It will make climbing even harder with icy rungs and the breeze gusting against us.’

We kept on climbing, moment by moment the wind speed increased and we found ourselves hanging on harder as we entered a vortex of winds and clouds. I was not sure but it even seemed as if the ladder had begun to flex in the winds.

‘Its the entrance to the roof, about only about three metres to go now.’ Tara called out with relief in her voice.

‘Come on.’

‘Keep up all of you’ Chuck said.

‘Thank God, there is another platform inside the lip of the lift shaft, all of you get up here as quick as you can.’ Tara paused.

‘Double quick if you can.’

The last metres were a desperate scramble for me, the winds buffeting me were getting worse and worse and the ladder was definitely starting to flex. I saw the cavern roof a moment before I got there. As I pulled myself up onto the circular platform around the lift shaft my last glimpse of the chamber reminded me of nothing so much as a scene from some sort of hell realm. Faint lights still glittered here and there illuminating clouds of gasses building into anvil shaped peaks and valleys, that seemed to hint that thunderstorms and lightning were immanent.

We were all full of relief that the climb up the ladder had gone okay and for a moment we sat with our backs against the rock wall catching our breath.

The makers had changed their scheme here I realised looking around now. On the other side of the shaft the wall of the lift shaft had a spiral stair well inset into it now with stairs in it which ran up round and round into the darkness above.

‘Stairs’ I said pointing to the other side of the side.

‘Good’ grunted Chuck, he was sitting next to Cindy’s body looking as if even he had pushed himself to his limit carrying her limp form up the ladder.

I leaned out and stared over the edge into the cavern below.

‘Chandra’ Roberto, said quietly and in a conspiratorial tone.

‘Yes’, I looked at him as he tapped on his wrist monitor where the atmospheric gas sensor’s read outs were. I gazed down at my own read outs. The atmosphere was thinning fast and it was almost all oxygen and hydrogen now most of the time apart from when gusts of chlorine and methane gusted down the shaft in a peculiar back draft.

‘Chandra, the pressure at the surface is about fifty percent less than it was in here. Its at seventy percent now.’

‘Must be some impressive eddies up ahead where the atmosphere from here is out gassing onto the surface.’ I said wondering what he was getting at.

‘What will happen when the pressures equalise do you think?’

I got a sense that he was thinking that perhaps a down draft would be set up. I whispered.

‘Down draft?’

‘Maybe...’

We were right, and wrong, all at the same time. We missed out a stage. We were not thinking about what would happen if lightning broke out in an atmosphere which was all but pure oxygen and hydrogen below us.

‘Crackle’ The sound of an electric discharge over our comm band.

For in an instant I saw a brilliant tableau laid out before me as a lightning bolt arced between the clouds and one of the ship yard gantries. Chuck was standing over Cindy’s body. Tara was making her way round to the foot of the stairs and David was in the act of standing up. As the lightning struck the gantry the air around its impact site burst into a brilliant glowing ball of fire. A shock wave rolled out like a ripple on a pond moving through the air in advance of a wall of fire that began to spread out engulfing the buildings below us in a fire storm.

‘Run, run, we have got to get out before the fire storm reaches us!’ Roberto screamed and leaping to his feet began to move towards the foot of the stairs.

We ran for it. We were all still roped together and as Tara leapt onto the stairs I was pulled to my feet by the rope. It was all I could do to stop myself being pulled over the edge. Chuck had no time to hook Cindy's body onto his link in the rope and just managed to pick her body up and drape her over his shoulder as we ran for the stairs. I pounded along at the end of the line. Onto the stairs, up the first steps and into the spiral of stairs that like a spring coiled up ahead into the lift shaft. We made it as far as about a few hundred metres ahead before suddenly the darkness of the shaft on my left was suddenly replaced by a wall of white light.

We were saved by the superheated gas's extreme speed as they rocketed up the shaft. They were moving so fast they did not stop to eddy into the stairway. So we clambered up a nightmare stairway in which only inches from my side an inferno roared in a pillar of living fire.

How long we ran I don't know. It seemed to be forever but it was probably only a few minutes. There was no time to think. Tara's voice came over the comm channel in my headset breaking through the crackle of the lightning discharges in the chamber below.

'I've reached another way station, stay or go?'

'Stop! Stop!' Cried Roberto.

'Copy, do that guys' Came Chuck's confirmation.

'Its to your, right a sharp turn, into a side entrance.' Tara shouted out.

Chuck up ahead of me stumbled as he turned, and Cindy's body slipped from his shoulder. He yelled out.

'Cindy!'

As Cindy's body hit the column of superheated gasses it flicked over and seemed to hang in space for an instant. As if in a weird moment of saying goodbye I saw her face serene in the glowing light. The next moment, her body was caught up in the slipstream and accelerated up the shaft so fast that it was gone in an instant.

I made it, last, I pulled round the corner and stumbled and ended up in a pile against Tara who saw me and visibly breathed a sigh of relief seeing that I had made it. Chuck stood with his arms by his sides and his head bowed.

'Damn.'

'You did your best' I said.

‘Just wasn’t good enough’ he said despondently.

I looked around us, to one side the pillar of gasses to the other a dark tunnel leading to who knows where.

Chuck spoke, ‘Roberto, take over for the moment, what next?’

I checked my temperature data on my monitor.

‘Roberto’ I looked over at him, ‘The temperature in the shaft is rising. It will soon be over a thousand degrees, our suits are not designed for that sort of heat. We can’t survive in the shaft if it continues like this.’

‘We are trapped’ Chuck said despairingly.

‘No, no, we are not.’ Tara cried back, ‘This tunnel must go somewhere, lets follow it and see if it leads back up to the surface.’

‘Nothing else to do’ Roberto said, ‘Everybody on your feet lets move!’

We ran, the tunnel ran level for a while then began to slope upwards. I felt a sense of hope growing as we ran up hill.

Then we came to a branch in the tunnel. Tara stood staring at the two tunnel mouths, one ran on flat leading off to the left, one led up to the right.

‘Which way?’

‘Right and up’ said Roberto.

‘No, left’ I said.

‘Why?’ Roberto snapped back.

‘The control panels are always on the left. It is the direction to controls. It is the direction out.’ I said with as much conviction as I could muster.

‘Okay its left folks. Keep going.’ Later I asked Roberto why he had followed my advice and he told me ‘No idea really, just seemed right at that instant.’ I am not sure to this day why I thought left was the right way either.

The tunnel curved to the left and suddenly ended at the foot of a spiral stairway that led up another shaft.

‘More stairs!’ Tara’s voice sounded elated as she bounded onto the steps.

We ran behind her, and ran and ran. Gradually we started to slow down. We had been climbing forever it seemed and the stairs wound round and round it seemed forever without any change. I moved ahead almost on automatic wondering when we would get to the top

when I found myself colliding with Roberto. We were all standing behind Tara who was staring intently at a blank wall in front of her.

‘It can’t be a dead end’ She said with a tremor in her voice. ‘Not after all that we have been through.’

‘Take a careful look’ I said as I looked intently at the blank surface ahead. It was blank featureless rock like the walls on the outer side of the shaft.

‘Any sign of a control panel?’ David asked checking the wall.

‘Nothing’ I said staring at a blank wall.

I gazed at the lift shaft, the shaft wall, nothing. Then I looked up.

‘Roof access!’ I cried in elation. Above the lift shaft was a circular hatch with a set of six hexagonal barrel shapes projecting down from it.

‘How do we get it open?’ I said.

Roberto stared at the hexagons, ‘I think they are bolts, so we unbolt it I think, anybody got a spanner?’

We had climbing gear, protective suits, sensors, flash lights: but no spanner.

So near and yet so far was how it felt.

‘Should we retrace our steps?’ David said, ‘Maybe the other tunnel led out another way that is not blocked.’ Nobody chimed in to say yes. We knew were beaten.

We sat there for hours it seemed exhausted, beaten wondering what to do. After a while I noticed a faint beeping that was irritating me.

‘Another problem you guys, I am running out of air.’

Everyone stared at their life support monitors.

‘Should be okay my suit has still got 40% charge.’ Said Chuck.

‘Check’ came back the response from everybody else.

My suit read ‘remaining charge three percent of capacity’. I had maybe an hour or so to live. I checked my sensor arrays the atmosphere in the lift shaft was not breathable, it was equal parts of methane and oxygen now. The process of out-gassing must be slowing down and the surface atmosphere penetrating into all the tunnels.

‘Well we almost made it’ Tara sighed.

‘I couldn’t have brought Cindy’s body back anyway it seems’ Chuck slumped against the wall and almost swallowed his words. We sat silently for a moment.

‘Do you think they will ever find us?’ Roberto asked nobody in particular.

‘I doubt it’ said David, ‘you know it always seemed romantic to me to be lost on an alien planet. When I was a child I dreamed of this kind of thing, now it seems like a nightmare.’

‘I think the power failure was our fault too’ Roberto sighed. ‘Probably as the atmospheric pressure in the chamber began to fall it interfered with some system and the power plant started to fail.’

‘You can’t tell that is the case’ I said ‘it might have been anything.’

‘Anything we did you mean.’

‘Could have been a coincidence.’

‘I don’t think so.’

Chuck broke in ‘Don’t start arguing now and make a drama out of a disaster.’

He paused and chuckled. ‘Would have been better if David had broken his god damn wrist firing the piton gun at the very beginning and we had had to abandon today’s survey all together.’

‘Piton gun.’ The word rang round my brain, I jumped up with a jolt.

‘Of course, the god damn piton gun, we can shoot the bolts off the hatch!’

‘Hey, that’s right’ cried out David.

The first shots did not work, for a moment it seemed that all that would happen was that David would end up with a broken wrist, or worse a cracked head.

Then the third shot worked. One bolt snapped off and plummeted down the shaft. Next Roberto tried shooting a bolt off to the left. It came off second try. Then the next. As we started shooting at the third bolt I noticed a wisp of gas trickling round the far side of the shaft. As the third bolt shattered in the shot from the piton gun the panel began to tilt a little towards us.

‘Shoot the far bolt next’ I said to David.

He sighted along the piton gun as if he was in a Western. Hindered only by the lack of sights on the piton gun. The piton shot out and hit the bolt square on and as it shattered the whole hatch seemed to shudder. The weight of the hatch was too much for the remaining two bolts to bear and they snapped. We stared in horror as the hatch seemed for a moment to pitch in our direction threatening to crush us all to death at the last moment before it tilted and crashed down the

shaft. It bounced from wall to wall as it fell and even though it made no sound in the suit I could swear it made the ground shudder beneath my feet.

‘Well what do we have here? Said Tara shining her light up into the opening.

A dark chamber greeted our eyes with a vaulted roof in a half circle.

‘Keep a good hold on the rope while I try and climb up over the limb you guys, I don’t want to fall down with the hatch into the darkness below, be ready to catch me if I fall.’ Tara said as she swung up and catching hold of the lip of the hatchway pulled herself first out over the lift shaft and then over its lip and disappeared. For a tense moment we waited.

‘You are going to love this’ she said, ‘Come on up guys.’

We clambered round and over the lip of the shaft.

For a moment I could not figure out where we were. Then I realised. We were standing in the first cave where the hologram had been. The hatch had been the base for the hologram display itself.

I checked my air supply, five minutes left.

‘Did we leave this chamber pressurised?’

‘Sure did’ said Chuck smiling as he cracked open his helmet and breathed.

I reckon I was the happier man when I did the same.

‘So maybe this is not such a bad day’ I thought as I drew the life giving air into my lungs and looked over at the comm station with its welcoming lights telling us the base was online and we could call in any moment. ‘But never, ever’ I said to myself, ‘forget to check your suit before you set out on a mission again.’

Roberto ran over to the comm station and flicked the standby to on.

‘Base this is Roberto, we are back.’

A relieved sounding voice broke over our comm link.

‘Am I glad to hear from you guys we have been going out of our minds wondering what happened to you.’ Then Natasha paused and sounding puzzled said. ‘You are calling in from where you were yesterday, I thought you went down the number four shaft. How come?’

‘Its a long story Natasha, we will tell you when we get back.’

‘Good to hear you too Chandra, better come quick we have been ordered to leave as soon as you report in.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘You will see as soon as you get out of the museum. Hop to it guys.’

We all tramped to the exit and made our way out onto the platform outside. The light outside was different from anything I had seen before, the air was full of eddies of scarlet, crimson, green and crystal coloured gases and sparkling particles. As we scrambled down the scree slope to the base lightning flashed above us and up the valley a funnel like a tornado was whipping round and round.

‘That must be where we went down the shaft.’ I called over to Roberto gesturing at the tornado. ‘Its set up some kind of vortex in the air.’

‘Come on, we can talk about it when we are back.’ Tara snapped.

The moment we rushed into the shuttle bay we were met by the sight of Natasha gesturing from the driving seat of the shuttle for us to get straight in and not go into the base. As the airlock closed its outside door I felt the shuttle kick forward as it pulled out of the bay.

Stumbling out as it rocked and buffeted up the slope I slumped down into a seat by Natasha.

‘What’s the hurry?’

‘Not sure, orbit base called in ten minutes ago and told us we had fifteen minute to get out.’

‘Didn’t you tell them we were not back yet?’

‘They told us to wait fifteen minutes and then get out, whether or not you got back.’ She smiled and sighed. ‘I am so glad you folks called in when you did, I couldn’t imagine having left without you.’

‘Hum, I don’t think I would have spoken to you again if you had.’

As I said it the irony of it struck me, I would not have because I would not have lived.

‘Strap in folks we are going for an emergency lift off now we have reached the designated lift off site.’ Natasha brought the shuttle to a halt in the midst of a flat area between the canyon walls. Shuttles like that one have a capability to be used as surface vessels on a long term basis or to do just one lift into orbit. It was a one shot option, a last resort.’

Natasha opened a link to the Orbit base, ‘Base shuttle alpha reporting ready to lift’.

‘Copy that Base Shuttle, ready to pick you up, Go! Go! Go!’

‘Roger.’

Natasha hit the initiate sequence and the life support module separated links from the ground vehicle and the boosters kicked in. They were needed to get us up to a sufficient altitude above the surface where the AG drive could kick in. Ever tried lifting from a uneven surface with an Anti-Gravity drive? Don't. That's most spacers advice. You simply can't program the complexities of the local gravitational field into the processor. So you end up flying off sideways or skewed, any which ways its a disaster waiting to happen. The boosters knocked me back into my seat as we lifted and waited for that interminable moment when the AG drive kicked in. Through gritted teeth, Natasha whispered.

'Cindy, she didn't make it did she, I am so sorry Chandra.'

'It was a mess Natasha, a mess, I'll tell you later.'

Three minutes later into the lift off, the boosters' pressure stopped, with an audible 'clunk' they disconnected and fell away and the AG drive kicked in and we started coasting up to orbit.

'Chandra, check this out, look at this on the monitor, all hell is breaking loose on the surface below us.'

I looked at the monitor, the landscape was criss-crossed by rivers of fire it seemed, canyons opening up perhaps where the underground cylinder installations had been I suspected. I gestured to Roberto to look at the area where we had been as I overlaid a schematic which showed the previous landscape layout. The area where the caves and the base camp had been was now a chasm between mile high cliffs with rivers of fire rolling along its base.

'Good bye base camp, good bye ruins of a lost civilisation.' Roberto said.

'First time I have discovered a lost civilisation in one day and destroyed it to.' I laughed, with a hollow feeling in my stomach knowing there was going to be big, and I mean big, trouble about this.

'Whoa, what's this happening now?' Natasha whispered as she looked at the monitor. A glowing area had appeared in the midst of where the plateau to our North had been. Moment by moment it changed from a dull red glow to a brilliant crimson and then a ring of scarlet around a glowing golden centre.

'My God, its the power plant location, get us out of here Natasha it is going to blow.' Roberto screamed as a plume of white light erupted from the surface topped by a mushroom cloud. A dome of white light

seemed to spread out in an instant to cover the entire area to the North of us. Moments later I noticed on the monitors covering other views of the planet similar explosions taking place all over the place, in three, in six, in twelve, in too many places to count.

‘We are above the atmosphere now’ Natasha breathed a sigh of relief ‘looks as if we should be okay unless something else happens. What more can happen, looks like a nuclear holocaust down there.’

‘Don’t see there being any follow up expeditions, do you?’ Tara said glumly. Chuck had not said anything since getting on the shuttle. He sighed and shrugged.

‘Well at least it can’t get any worse.’

Turned out he was wrong about that. Three hours later as we moved away from the orbit base in the main ship we saw the first signs of another breakdown in the planet system.

‘What is this spectrum?’ I asked Roberto as I looked at the image of the rapidly receding planet in the monitor pointing at a mass spectrometer readout.

‘Invert Iridium’ he paused ‘Odd, and rare, only found in class four quasars, not on planets.’ He checked the readings again, ‘It should not be showing at all, its impossible.’

‘Err, why?’ I asked raising my eyebrows ‘A lot of impossible things happened today.’

‘I hear what you are saying, but this is something else, a class four quasar is a rare phenomena, its an exploding galactic core. The gravity and pressure at its heart is simply not possible anywhere else as far as I know.’

‘In other words nobody has ever seen one up close.’

‘Nor will they until we can travel between galaxies.’

‘Neither from the sound of it should you want to see one from close up.’

We both looked at each other as we hit the emergency button at the same moment.

‘Natasha’, we shouted in perfect harmony, ‘Get us out of here, transition to hyperspace, now.’

‘Okay, keep your hats on, we are just coming up to transition, transition in five, four, three, two’ At the moment she said ‘two’ the monitors from the orbital base showed a lime green light breaking through the surface of the planet and as she said ‘one’ I seemed to see

the planet split apart and reveal a piercing green glow at its centre, like a cats eye glinting in the dark of the night. As Natasha said 'Zero' the monitors all went blank, we jumped into hyperspace, and Tau Ceti went super-nova.

'Definitely, no follow up mission to Tau Ceti III' I said.

'No Tau Ceti' Roberto whispered.

Chapter 2 Right Resolve

Bodh Gaya: 18/12/2645 06:46

The sudden shock of the cold water on my skin sent a thrill through my body as I plunged into the Lotus pond. Leaving behind the ripples on the surface I kicked out and surged ahead deeper down towards the centre where the base of the statue still stood. By its side fish darted into crevices and peaked out at me from in between the rubble heap that represented the remains of the image of a hooded serpent protecting the meditating Buddha which had once adorned the pedestal.

For the moment my interest was not in the remains, interesting as they were, but in what was reported to be lying trapped in the water lily stems. I swam up close and stared down. The sight chilled my already cold body. A Tibetan monk lay on his back staring up at the sky. His mouth hung open and no sign of breath was apparent. Not surprising really considering the bullet hole in his forehead.

‘Shit’ I cursed to myself ‘A third Lama.’ The pressure in my lungs of holding my breath was building up as I stared down and after a moment I kicked out and swam up to the surface.

‘Another?’ Constable Deepak called out.

I nodded and began to swim towards the shore. Holding onto the crumbling rim of the tank I looked up at Deepak.

‘Make arrangements to have the body photographed and taken away for a post-mortem.’ I gazed around, a few curious onlookers were starting to gather at the steps leading down from the temple. ‘Get the area closed off straight away’.

Something nibbled at my toe. I looked down, a bloody great catfish.

‘And do it quickly before these ruddy fish devour the body and make more of a mess of this than it is already.’

Deepak averted his gaze as I climbed out dripping onto the shore. I wound my long tresses round my hands and squeezed the water out onto the parched earth. My uniform clung to the full curves of my body. I was glad when Meenakshi handed me a blanket which I

draped over my form to hide it from the eyes of any curious onlooker in the crowds. Doesn't do for a women District Magistrate to be seen in a clinging wet uniform in public.

'District Magistrate Deepa Madam' Chopra said with one ear to his comm link. 'The Temple Management Committee want to know how long the area is going to be closed off.' He paused evidently listening to the tirade he was receiving. 'They say it has to be reopen by 2pm as a party of pilgrims from Delta-Cygni are due in.'

I shook my head, 'Stall them, don't tell them when it will be open again, say "you are awaiting on further information" that may hold them for a while.'

Thinking about it for a moment I realised that I needed to get out of the area before one of the Temple Monks came over, or I would be stuck here for hours.

'Dinesh, get the motor going' I called out to the copter pilot. 'Chopra, Meenakshi, back to the Thana now, there is nothing more for us here until the scans come in, let's go.' I said as I strode over to the copter and we piled in.

The down draft from the rotor blades sent ripples out over the surface and the lilies, white, blue and the odd yellow blooms waved in the wind. As we lifted off I could see the red robed figure of the head monk bustling down the stairs to the pond enclosure. 'Just in time, eh?' Meenakshi nudged my shoulder as she shouted in my ear over the din of the motor.

The din was deafening and made conversation, or even comm link communication, difficult, in fact let's face it, virtually impossible. It gave me a moment anyhow to survey the scene and try and put things in place. The scaffolding around the main temple was coming down, more had been exposed since yesterday. I can't say I am a history buff but I don't remember pictures of the temple looking anything like it did now. Still I could be wrong, perhaps it had been gold and silver plated and encrusted with glittering gems before. What the hell, if people wanted it that way why not? After all it had been nothing but a pile of bricks and rubble six months ago. We were relatively lucky, I suppose, the firestorms had pretty much sterilised the whole area, apart from the aquatic life it seemed. The decontamination teams had a fairly easy time as the amount of radioactive fallout had been low in this area.

I gazed out at the immensity of the dome that soared above us. Five kilometres high at its apex, it was big enough to support a micro-climate inside it, and sturdy enough to keep out the real climate. Everybody had said Old Earth was a basket case and beyond repair. But ingenuity has no limits, if we could colonise barren planets why not the devastated ruins of Old Earth? Personally I wasn't so sure if it was a good idea. Two years ago I had been sitting down to a plate of milk rice for breakfast at home when the comm link bleeped.

'Deepa?' Commissioner Malhotra's voice came online 'Can you talk, are you busy?'

'No bhai, this is a good moment I have just watered the garden, the orchids are looking wonderful this year, you must come around and see them. What's up?'

'Ever thought of Earth as a posting?'

I laughed, 'Not much work for police there I reckon, rocks and ruins don't do crimes I imagine.'

'No, don't joke Deepa, this is real, people are going back.'

'When? Where? How? Why?' I spat out down the comm.

'Next year. Bodh Gaya India. In a habitat dome. Because,' he stopped his staccato speech and slowly said 'Because the Buddhists say its the centre of the universe.'

'Ah' I sighed, 'I saw something about this, its the temple project isn't it?'

'Yes its them.' He added, 'And they have the funding as well.'

The Chinese Pure Land community on Delta-Cygni were doing very nicely it seemed these days and were concerned with both their future and their past. Their future was heavily linked to mass producing space ship drives. Their past was linked to their Buddhist heritage through the New Pure Land movement. It shouldn't have surprised anybody that the Pure Land movements of Old Earth had enthusiastically taken up the colony ship notion during the diaspora. After all their whole drive was to get to the Pure Land. Maybe it was out there in the galaxy somewhere. Maybe they were just seeking economic betterment really.

Anyhow after the fall of Old Earth it turned out there were Pure Land Communities on Sukhavati in the Delta-Cygni system and on Wu-Tai in the Deneb system, as well as group on an obscure star in the Beta-Australis region that had renamed their star Shaolin and

refused to have anything to do with the other Chinese colonies. That in a sense was the trouble, they were all competing with each other and looking for ways to outdo each other. Due to this they poured money into religious works which showed their piety, and tried to prove they were more pious than each other.

If they could they might have put domes over Wu-Tai and the Shan mountains in China. But nobody could do anything in China, the ground still glowed over most of Guang Zhou and the area around it and lakes of bubbling boiling heavy water marked the sites of Beijing and Shanghai. Nobody was going back to China for a long time yet.

India though was different. Okay, the Pakistanis had clearly lobbed a few missiles over, Delhi area was pretty much wiped down to bedrock in fact. Kashmir virtually wiped of the planet surface. But clearly their stockpiles had run out quickly and the rest of the country had suffered only from the firestorms and fall out that had raged all over the planet in advance of the nuclear winter that held Old Earth cloaked in its icy grip.

‘Humm’ I had said to Malhotra, ‘What do they want a New Hindustan Police Inspector for?’

‘To keep them from each others throats I think!’ Malhotra laughed.

‘Deepa on the one hand we are supposed to represent the old Indian Government, which kind of makes sense, and on the other... Well none of them trust the others to do the job impartially, there are three Chinese groups, one Singhalese group, four or five Tibetan groups and one Ambedkarite Buddhist group of Indians from New Birmingham.’

‘And I am supposed to keep them all happy?’ I asked, then lowered my tone.

‘Malhotra, why do you want me to go?’

‘Deepa, there will also be a Hindustani contingent, we can’t let these foreigners take over the old mother land, you are the ideal person to keep an eye on them too’ He paused, then said emphatically ‘and its a promotion, District Magistrate Deepa Bharati’

I came to Earth, nobody turns down being made a DM.

The copter began to descend toward the barren area of rubble, silt and sand that represented the site of Gaya town. Somehow it managed to look like stagnant ponds, blocked drains and piles of rubbish piled up against the broken down walls that had once been a city of sorts.

Even now you could still make out the site of Visnupad temple and the streets of the old town that clustered around it and the neat roads that had made up the English cantonment. Some bright spark of a visionary, that is a complete idiot, on Hindustan had decided to build the new police headquarters on the site of the old Thana, the British period law courts and District Magistrates residence. So we stuck miles from Bodh Gaya in the midst of a totally barren wilderness. The only advantage had turned out to be it was too far from the squabbles around the temple site for the various factions of monks to drop in to see us constantly. Oh yes and one other thing. As the copter landed by the side of the two prefab buildings I looked over at the marble plaque which marked the site of the new police headquarters. If you got up close and read it the inscription read ‘The inauguration of the new Police Headquarters complex by Krishnalal Paswan Minister for extra Hindustani administrative affairs, made on....’ The rest was lost under a pile of dirt and broken packing cases piled up against the plaque. Somehow our budget requisitions never seemed to reach the top of the ministers pile of papers in New Patliputra and the building had never got beyond the planning stage and two porta-cabin type structures that held the site office. We used them simply as a base for the helicopters now and stored supplies in them. In reality we all still lived and worked in the space ship in which we had come here. We got out of the helicopter and made our way over to the access tunnel that lead from the edge of the dome to the exterior of the dome where like a minaret on a mosque towered the bulk of our ship. Officially it was the ALPYV III ‘Antara-Loka-Prashashana-Yana-Vidyutagati-III’, actually nobody called it that, some wag had written “Bijlirani” on the flight manifest one day and the name had stuck, In English “Lightning Queen”.

‘Deepa Madam, you have 27 urgent messages waiting for you.’

Uravashi, my PA said as I entered my office.

‘Who are they from?’

‘21 from the Temple Management Committee, one from the Singhalese, four from the Wu-Tai delegation and one from the laboratory.’ She grinned anticipating my next order.

‘Put them all in the pending folder apart from the lab report eh?’

I sat down and looked at the lab report, it was as I expected. Shot at astonishingly close range, about five feet, by a small arms weapon of

antique design. According to the ballistics a handgun. I put the print out down and stared out at the scene from my window. 'The same as the first two eh.' I said to myself.

In the distance I could see the crags and rocks of the outcrops of rock that marked the peaks of Gaya Head and Brahma Yoni, outside the dome. The snow was thick on their summits and drifts of white and odd yellow snow were banked up against their South sides where the monsoon storms had driven the packed dirty snow months back. Overhead dark grey clouds hung in a blue grey banks like a steel roof over the frozen landscape of the depths of an Indian nuclear winter. It matched my mood at that moment. I felt frozen, unable to figure out how to act. Four days ago the first body had been found, a Tibetan monk, dead from a gun shot wound to the chest, his body deposited in a well by the site of the old Hindu monastery, the second, another Tibetan had been found yesterday, he had been shot in the back of the head. His body was found in the silt of the old water tank in front of the Tourist Bungalow complex. Neither body had provided much clues about where they died, both had evidently been dumped after they were murdered elsewhere. Nobody had seen anything.

'Chopra' I opened a comm channel to him. Any news from the crime scene scans?'

'Madam, initial reports indicate that the corpse was deposited there sometime about midnight last night. The time of death though was earlier, looks as if he died about nine last night.'

'Anything else' I asked feeling that this was no news really at all.

'One odd thing Madam, his toe nails have traces of black volcanic sands under them.'

'Eh?' my ears pricked up. 'Volcanic?'

'That's right madam, I can't understand it, where could he have come from, there are no black volcanic sands in Bodh Gaya.'

'Perhaps' I thought to myself 'this is the first real clue to this case.'

'Have you checked the records from the previous bodies to see if they had the same traces'. I asked enthusiastically.

'Yes Madam, and that is odder still, the first one had everyday sand and dirt under his toe nails and the second had what we thought was just dirt, but we have checked again and he also has traces of volcanic sand under his toe nails, and under his finger nails too.'

I began to see a pattern.

Then Uravashi came online. ‘Madam, Venerable Dhammarakkhita is here to see you.’

‘Here we go again, Uravashi, tell him to come in.’

The door opened and the tall and stately figure of the Head Monk of the Singhalese monastery came in. When it had become known that the Bodh Gaya temple was to be rebuilt the small colony on Peredeniya Prime had been amongst the first to express interest in coming back. At that time the Venerable Dhammarakkhita had been a rising star in the Buddhist Sangha on Peredeniya Prime seeking to re-establish the monastic hierarchy on his home planet and an avid student of the heritage of the Singhalese community. He had raised funds for the establishment of a monastery at Bodh Gaya and come enthusiastic to rebuild the Singhalese Monastery, the Mahavihar, at Bodh Gaya. The scheme was ambitious and needed enormous funding as it had in ancient times been the greatest monastery in Bodh Gaya. Dhammarakkhita was possessed by a great vision of creating the leading monastic seat of learning in the Galaxy with himself as its chief director. Unfortunately he had come into conflict with the Venerable Sheeladeepa as soon as he had arrived on Earth.

Sheeladeepa came from the struggling Ambedkarite colony of New Birmingham which had been established by Indians from the old UK in the Hydra system. He too had come with a visionary scheme to Earth. Unfortunately his vision and that of Dhammarakkhita clashed. Both wanted control of the main temple. For the moment Sheeladeepa had it as well, as his group had arrived first and claimed the temple site by simple right of getting there first. Both based their claim on historical precedent. To Dhammarakkhita the Singhalese control of the site from the 4th century to the 12th century CE constituted a valid claim to the temple. To Sheeladeepa the Ambedkarite control of the temple from the mid 20th century to the end of the Old Earth culture constituted an absolute claim to the temple. Neither could see any solution other than the other giving way. The constant claim and counter claim from each was making my life very difficult. Very difficult.

‘Madam, I hope you are well, I was sorry to hear the news of the latest outrage.’

‘Thank you Dhammarakkhita, it is most distressing I agree.’

‘Clear evidence, I am sure you agree, that the present Temple Management Committee is not able to exercise proper stewardship of the temple, would you not say?’

I stifled a sigh and clenched my fists on the arms of my chair hidden by the desk from Dhammarakkhita. ‘I am sure that if the Temple Management Committee feels they need any help they will be the first to ask for it, but’ I paused as if to emphasise what I was going to say ‘I am sure that the depositing of a corpse in the lotus pond was as distressing to them as anybody. I cannot see that it was in any way under their control that such a crime was committed.’

‘I am sure, it is most regrettable that this sacred site should be plagued by such a crime wave. In fact I have come to report another incident.’

‘Another incident?’

‘Yes the fire wall on our data systems was breached last night and I wish to lodge a letter of protest regarding the matter.’

‘Was any data accessed?’

‘Yes, files containing the plans for the New Mahavihar were accessed.’

‘Any particular files?’

Dhammarakkhita seemed to squirm a little in his seat ‘They related to, how can I put this, the recycling system for human by products.’

‘Do you mean the sewers?’

Dhammarakkhita nodded, then changed tack and spoke out.

‘It is an outrage Madam that any of our files should be accessed by unauthorised personal, sewers or spires, it matters not, I demand that you investigate the culprits.’

I could see what was coming next.

‘The culprits? How can I do that if I do not know who they are?’

‘Surely it is obvious, it must be the Temple Management Committee they must be planning to copy our superior systems for their own establishment.’

‘Do you have any evidence it was them?’ This was the problem I was faced by. Constant incidents at the Singhalese Monastery and the Temple Complex but in fact there was never any evidence indicating that either party was responsible for the incidents at the other establishment.

‘Who else?’

I stood up as if to indicate the meeting was over and said emphatically ‘I sympathise with your situation, but without any evidence I cannot act, further more in this case’ I smiled ‘I cannot see why to be honest anybody should be interested in the new sewer system for your monastery.’

‘Madam, I shall still lodge a formal letter of complaint this harassment cannot continue unchecked.’ Dhammarakkhita got up and moved towards the door.

‘Uravashi will be happy to help you lodge the formal letter of complaint and we will of course keep it on file.’

As Dhammarakkhita reached the door, he paused and turned round.

‘One more matter Madam which I think you might find interesting, a team of eminent scholars from Peredeniya Prime who have been investigating the Tau Ceti findings will be visiting tonight and we will be holding a seminar at the Monastery Historical Research Centre to discuss the implications of the discovery. I would be grateful if you would accept this invitation to be an honoured guest at the seminar.’ He paused. ‘In the capacity of the official representative of the Hindustan Government.’

I couldn’t really refuse such an invitation.

‘I would be delighted to attend’ I smiled and showed him to the door.

As the door closed I groaned silently and fulminated to myself ‘hours of listening to academics droning on about the greatness of the Buddhist past’ I shook my head, ‘this I need like a hole in the head.’

Then I remembered the holes in the heads of the Lamas and realised that there were worse things than being an honoured guest at an official function.

Still one thing bothered me, why would anybody want to look at the plans for the Monastery sewer system?

I didn’t have time to wonder about it further during the day as shortly after Dhammarakkhita left I was summoned to an incident at the site of the rebuilding of the Maitreya statue. Two groups of contractors had come to fisticuffs over the question of which of them had left the fencing in a manner which had allowed a herd of precious cows to break out of its paddock and into an equally precious orchard of tree saplings. Both accused the other of the negligence which had led to the loss of hundreds of saplings which would eventually have

graced the gardens of the rebuilt statue, not to mention the loss of a cow which they claimed was worth at least ten million Rupees. To be honest it was a storm in a tea cup it seemed to me. But, that's police work, working with people who have boundary issues and trying to soothe tempers.

My own temper was fairly frayed by the evening. As it was not a police function I had to drive from the station to Bodh Gaya in a jeep. The road ran by the dry and sandy river bed. The river had never been much most of the time apparently. Nowadays it was nothing all of the time, the frozen wasteland out of the dome didn't allow any rivers to flow.

'Probably be contaminated with fallout if there was water in the river, eh what do you think Chopra?' I said to my driver, Inspector Chopra, as we sped along the rough river road bouncing over the potholes.

'Madam, you know what they say, the river was cursed by Sita for not coming to her aid to disappear periodically, this is just the further fulfilment of the prophecy.'

'You don't really believe all that stuff do you Chopra? I giggled.

'Madam, it is not "all that stuff" it is our Hindu heritage you are talking about.'

'Okay, sorry, don't take my comment the wrong way. I meant surely the curse can't have been meant to apply to this situation, can it?'

Chopra was distracted by something for a moment at the edge of the cone of lights our headlights cast.

'Madam, the eternal knows no limits, if Sita cursed the river it is still cursed.'

He grinned.

'If I find the buggers who are removing river sand without a permit they will be cursed too, but by me, not Sita.'

'What do you mean?'

'Madam, just a moment ago I spotted another place where somebody had been digging without a permit, probably digging sand up for building work I expect. How some of these contractors think they will be able to pass off sub-standard building materials I do not understand.'

'What bothers me Chopra is that we will probably have to clear up the mess in the end.'

Suddenly Chopra spun the wheel and sent the jeep hurtling off the road.

‘What’s up?’ I said checking my deflector systems at my waist and my weapons systems were all online and my deflector field was ready to be activated. Doesn’t do for a DM to not consider her safety, I had one of the few working personal deflector fields in the dome. Still I was the only District Magistrate in the dome, actually come to think of it, on Earth, so it made sense.

‘Probably nothing Madam, but I saw something move down on the site of the old Hindu Monastery. Nobody is supposed to be there as its still cordoned off as a crime scene.’

‘Hum, okay, I’ll check the scans of the area’ I run a diagnostic on activity in the area in the last few hours since dusk. Nothing was evident in terms of human visitations to the site. Still to be honest the scans were not very effective, another instance of ‘Pending files’ in administration. We still didn’t have a normal surveillance system for the dome, it was ‘pending’. Like the police station I suspected it would be pending for long after my appointment here ended.

‘Can’t see anything Chopra, perhaps it was just the wind.’

Chopra drove the jeep round the pile of ruins that marked the courtyard and we were confronted by his criminal activity.

A cow was grazing chewing happily on the raffia tapes that we had stretched around the crime scene where the first Lama had been found in the well.

‘That’s where that lost cow went.’ Chopra grinned.

After the first three hours of the seminar I began to wonder how long I could stay awake. Somehow even the implications of the Tau Ceti discovery could be made boring if presented in a particular way. Unfortunately, the speakers at the seminar knew exactly this way of speaking.

‘The Greatness of the Buddhist tradition is further emphasised by these discoveries of what we might call the culture of the Previous Buddha Aliens, or as they are popularly now known “The Previous Buddhas”’. The speaker, the Venerable Mahanama, an old monk from Peredeniya University was saying. ‘There are fifty two factors which can be enumerated which show similarities between the monks on Tau Ceti and the true original Theravada Buddhist tradition preserved perfectly in the Sinhalese tradition even today. I shall consider the

fifty two factors under seven sub headings, each of which has seven elements apart from the seventh which has, I would argue, twelve factors....’ As I tried to stop myself dozing off I wondered if those figures added up. ‘The first subgroup of seven similarities concerns the ways in which the robes are worn, there are fourteen effective and seven further possible sub-features of this I would like to point out.’ I was about to consider pretending that an urgent call was calling me away when the entrance to the seminar chamber burst open and a number of figures barged past the doormen and monks on welcoming duty.

At their head was the rotund figure of Sheeladeepa waving a roll of paper tied up with red tape above his head.

‘Outrage! Outrage! We demand an explanation for this!’

Pandemonium broke out in the hall.

Well this had to be better than the seminar paper, I perked up.

I jumped to my feet and shouted out.

‘Quiet!’

People listen to a District Magistrate. The hall quietened down.

‘Sheeladeepa, this is an academic meeting, what is it that is so important that you have to interrupt the meeting in this manner?’

Dhammarakkhita smiled as if seconding what I has said.

‘Madam Magistrate, we demand an explanation for this’ He said waving the roll of paper in front of Dhammarakkhita’s face.

‘What is it?’ I asked, but had a sinking feeling in my stomach, it looked like a court writ.

‘It is a writ from the Hindustan High Court demanding we vacate the temple and hand over the management’ he hissed, ‘to the monks of the Shaolin community’ he grimaced ‘until such time as the issue of the management of the temple is settled.’

I turned and looked for a moment at Dhammarakkhita, then back at Sheeladeepa. ‘Who was the appellant for the writ?’

I knew what was coming next.

Sheeladeepa puffed up his chest as he spat out ‘Dhammarakkhita!’

The next morning under the watchful eyes of my forces, Constables Deepak and Ravi actually, Sheeladeepa and his followers slowly packed their possessions and moved out of the temple complex and into the Shiva Hotel. There they set up an impromptu headquarters and living quarters. Satyanarayan the proprietor was delighted to have

so many new guests and promised them all special rates on their rooms, and on their board.

Dhammarakkhita had little to say, he didn't really need to say anything. It was a masterstroke really. Goodness knows how long the matter would drag on in the courts now. The Hindustan justice system was not known for the rapidity of its judicial system. We, the police force, prided ourselves on our promptness and punctuality, we moved with the times. The courts were proud of a tradition of labyrinthine arguments and procedures which it had taken centuries to develop and they were not about to dismantle due to a small change like the devastation of the home planet and moving to a new star system. No nothing was above the law and its workings.

'Deepa, are you free to talk?' Inspector Chopra's voice came over my comm link.

'Free to talk, Chopra, what is it?' I asked wondering what could demand my attention at a time like this. I was standing on the mound where the Tara Temple was being rebuilt. It is sometimes called the spot where the Buddha stood with unblinking gaze staring at the Bodh Tree after his enlightenment. An excellent place to observe the goings on around the temple. Clearly the Buddha had known a good observation spot when he saw one.

'We have an identification on the third Lama.'

My ears pricked up.

'Who was he?'

'Lama Chimpa, he recently arrived from Amdo II and was staying at the Tibetan Monastery. Seems we had better go and inform Geshe-La of his sad demise.'

'Okay, on my way, meet you there.'

I swung round and walked out of the entrance way and up onto the Plaza area to the North of the Temple. Directly to the North stood the site of the Singhalese Great Monastery complex. To the West was the road to the river and I could see Sheeladeepa's men bustling around outside the Shiva Hotel. I swung quickly to the right and headed West towards the impressive white gateway of the Tibetan Monastery.

As I reached the doorway Chopra pulled up in a jeep and jumped out and walked the last steps to the threshold.

‘Geshe-La is not going to be pleased.’ I said shaking my head. ‘He is always suspicious of plots by Shugden followers against him, and this will only feed his paranoia.’

‘Perhaps he is right this time Madam. It would explain things, maybe Lama Chimpa spoke out against Shugden and was silenced for it by his rivals.’

‘I hope not, Chopra, that is yet another mess we don’t need cropping up here.’

Stepping in through the gateway I glanced up at the wheel of life painted on the wall flanked by the fierce guardian deities that were supposed to protect the monastery and the Buddha’s teachings. Shugden was in a sense a guardian who had got out of hand. Apparently he had been incarnate at the time of the fifth Dalai Lama but had then become a kind of malevolent spirit who the monks of the Gelug order worshipped in order to appease him. Over time he had become a kind of guardian deity of the Gelug order and he became identified with a sort of Gelug supremacy in which his followers spurned the teachings of the other orders, the Sakya, Nyingma and Karmapa orders. Some said that he killed monks who took initiation or teachings from the other orders. Some said that his followers did the actual killing. Which ever way it was: his name spelt trouble. Geshe-La, the Tibetan Abbott, was famous for his opposition to Shugden followers and had insisted that only one Tibetan Monastery would be built in Bodh Gaya, to house all the orders, even the Fifth Order, that of the Bon-po school, who some accused of not even being Buddhists.

‘Madam Magistrate, Inspector Chopra, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?’ Geshe-La said as we were ushered into his chambers. For a Tibetan Abbott he lived in humble surroundings. That is to say he sat on a high platform of yellow cushions at the top of a flight of stairs in front of rich gold, red and green brocade hangings. Inset in the hangings were Thangka paintings of diverse wrathful and peaceful deities which seemed to stare out of the images and survey the whole of the spacious chamber. Their gaze somehow pervaded the space between the wide plate glass windows on three sides of the hall which were themselves like eyes overlooking the entire area around the monastery.

We sat down on the bottom level of the stairs on low chairs provided for us.

‘One moment’ Geshe-La said ‘Tea for my guests’ he said speaking into his comm link.

‘So to business, Madam Magistrate, you have come over the death of Lama Chimpa I presume?’

‘Actually we came to inform you of his death, how did you know it was Lama Chimpa who was dead?’ I said suspiciously.

‘My dear Deepa’ He chuckled and slipped into a more personal tone as the attendant who had poured us steaming bowls of butter tea closed the door behind him.

‘It is the business of an Abbott to know how many monks there are and where they are.’

‘So, in that case Geshe-La who were the other monks and why did you not tell us who they were when Inspector Chopra called you previously?’ I said puzzled by this development.

‘Forgive me, I did not know who the others were, but Lama Chimpa’s absence was noted yesterday morning when he did not come to light 108 butter lamps as he had done so each morning previously in the shrine room.’

‘So, why didn’t you contact me?’

‘I had hoped that he was simply cloistered in meditation in his chambers.’

‘And?’ I said impatiently.

‘Regretfully we only checked this morning and found his chambers empty.’

‘Okay, is his room untouched, I would like the police to be allowed to see if there are any clues amongst his belongings to his death?’

‘Certainly.’

‘But first, Geshe-La can you think of any reason why somebody would have killed him, Shugden followers?’

Geshe-La shivered at the mention of the name.

‘Certainly they are hostile to me and what I represent, but Lama Chimpa was a simple pious young monk from Amdo II, I have not heard anything of his activities which would invite such a response from’ he added through gritted teeth ‘those people.’

‘Okay, what of the other two Lamas, you say that you did not recognise them as your monks.’ I checked the record quickly on my

comm unit. ‘You said “These are not Tibetan monks”, why were you so sure? Surely you don’t recognise all the Tibetans in Bodh Gaya?’

‘Ah, but Madam I do know all the Tibetans in Bodh Gaya, and all the monks in Bodh Gaya, and that is the point, Inspector Chopra broke the comm link before I had finished speaking. I was intending to say “These are not Tibetan monks. What is more they are not Tibetans, despite their being found wearing Tibetan monks robes.”’

I looked over at Chopra, he was inclined to be a bit hasty at times.

He nodded at me when he saw me looking at him as if admitting to his hasty action in terminating the call.

‘So do you recognise them?’ I said somewhat exasperated.

‘No, that is the curious matter, now that you ask me I will tell you what I think, they were certainly not Tibetan, they look more like Chinese to me and I don’t think they were Chinese monks either or I would have recognised them unless they only arrived very recently.’

I was not happy when I left. A search of Lama Chimpa’s rooms revealed nothing: lots of photographs of his monastery on Amdo II and his family, his personal devotional items and his two spare sets of robes. Nothing else at all apart from an open return ticket to Amdo II and his passport with a visa valid for six months, of which he had only used six days before his death.

Nor yet could anybody else in the monastery help us. Nobody had really got to know him and he had not talked much either. I resolved to take this up with the Tibetan Government in Extra-Terrestrial Exile police department and walked out the monastery doorway if anything more puzzled than before.

‘Chinese dressed as Tibetan monks? Why?’ I asked myself.

‘Fond of photography eh?’ Chopra broke into my reverie as we drove along the road back towards Gaya.

‘Who was?’

‘That Chimpa eh? Lots of photos in his room weren’t there, and old Dorje the shoe keeper at the door said he was never seen without his camera when he went down to the temple.’

‘Chopra’ I sighed totally exasperated this time, ‘how can you be an idiot and a genius at the same time?’

‘Not sure what you mean madam?’ Chopra said raising his eyebrows and giving me a sideways glance.

‘The camera you fool, where was it?’ I slapped my thigh with my left hand ‘That’s it, it was not with the body, it was not in his room, so it must have been taken by whoever murdered him.’

‘I can’t see anybody murdering somebody over a camera madam, least ways not the sort of camera a monk could afford.’

‘Hum that’s right, so maybe it was not the camera, but what he took a picture of that caused his death.’

‘Possible, but even an idiot like me would say, I can’t see even so why somebody would kill him for taking a snap.’

‘Unless somebody really, really, didn’t want their picture taken.’

‘Or didn’t want a picture taken of what they were doing.’ Chopra chuckled.

Back at my desk I turned to the in tray on my Email, 674 new messages it indicated. God, and that was after screening by Uravashi. What could they all be. Most turned out to be routine and I instructed the computer itself to compose replies to the messages I flagged. Some were clearly the sort of complaint from one or other monastery that I would need to actually reply to in person. Then in amongst the normal messages I spotted one which caught my attention, it included the subject line “Absconding Chinese pilgrims”.

Inspector Saxena of the immigration department was notifying me that a group of twelve Chinese pilgrims from Shaolin had overstayed their visas. The thing that worried Saxena, who loved tidy paperwork more than anything in the world, was that he had also failed to contact all twelve of them and was reporting them as “absconding”. How in hells name can you abscond in a habitat dome?

‘Saxena’ I called him over the comm system ‘Yes Madam?’

‘Its over this form C-21 you have filed with me, you are reporting as absconding a group of Shaolin pilgrims, can you explain it to me?’

‘No madam, and that is what is bothering me, form C-21 is for the registration of foreigners, I am sorry I used it for this purpose, but there is no form for absconding non-Hindustani nationals as far as I know, what form should I have used, an R-17b?’

‘Inspector Saxena, you can use any form you like for all I care, what I want to know is where they are, have you asked the Venerable Donald Chang about this?’

‘Any form I like? Even form R-17b?’

‘Forget forms Saxena!’ I shouted, ‘What does the Shaolin Abbott say?’

‘I can’t say Madam Deepa, his secretary said they were looking into the matter. I told them I would get back to them as soon as I determined the correct forms for use in an incident like this, nobody has ever overstayed their visa before, I didn’t know what to do.’

‘Thank you Saxena, I will investigate the matter myself now.’ I was about to break the link when something came to me. ‘Saxena, are the pilgrims photographs online?’

‘Yes Madam, as an attachment to the C form I sent you.’

‘Ta.’

I hit the button to retrieve the attachments and stared at the group of pilgrims. Seven men and five women, all young, all fit and strong looking, all... alive? I ran a cross check with the photographs of the first two Lamas.

I pushed my chair back from my desk and leaned back with my hands behind my head and breathed a deep sigh of relief. The hem of my sari hang loose over my shoulder and the soft down draft of air from the ceiling fan seemed to caress the naked skin of my stomach between my sari and my bodice.

I sighed, not for the safety of the pilgrims, but because two images matched. Now I knew who the first two “Lamas” were. Li Jiang and Toylan Ah Khet according to their passport data were their names. Odd, the names rang a bell in my head.

I opened a comm channel. ‘Chopra, get the chopper ready, we are visiting the Temple. Now. I’ll fill you in on the details on the way.’ As an afterthought I added.

‘Oh and get all the available officers on duty down to the Temple as well.’

‘Copy that Madam, all available officers?’

‘Yes, there is trouble afoot.’

A DM is paid for having a sixth sense, and I sensed something wrong, very wrong.

As I swung into the passenger seat in the chopper I noticed Chopra staring at me. I looked down and realised I was not dressed in my uniform but still wearing a sari from my quarters. Damn, I looked like I was dressed for visit to a temple, a maroon and gold Bengali sari. Not dressed for Police business.

‘Bugger, Chopra there is no time for me to change now, lets go.’

As I sat down I buckled on my deflector field belt and the weapons housings which formed bracelets around my upper arms. They looked for all the world like a gold and silver belt encrusted with gems and jewelled bangles on my arms.

‘My’ Chopra smiled, ‘are you going to make an impression today, you look every inch a Hindustani woman, like a cross between Lakshmi and Durga in that outfit.’

I shrugged my shoulders, ‘lets hope my Lakshmi side can come out today’.

Little did I know that it was more Durga the warrior goddess that would be needed that day than Lakshmi the gentle goddess of wealth and good fortune.

Due to the racket in the chopper I leant close to Chopra to yell in his ear.

‘There is something wrong with the Shaolin Delegation, they have hidden from us that two of a party of pilgrims have been masquerading as Tibetan Monks, and somehow two of them have got killed along the way.’

Chopra’s cheek brushed against mine as he held his head close to mine.

‘Ah ha, odd kind of pilgrims eh?’

The closeness was too much, especially for me in this outfit, I moved away and we flew on in silence together. Along the way I saw the police jeeps and a truck load of officers hurtling over the potholes on the river road to Bodh Gaya.

As the chopper began to descend towards the temple and I saw that there were other problems brewing. The plaza was full of red, ochre and yellow robed figures.

What could have brought them all to the temple?

Chopra landed right next to the North side of the main temple on the platform where a second Bodhi tree had stood before the fire storm. Incredibly, new shoots were springing from the site of the old tree.

We jumped out and made our way to the gate of the temple compound where the grey robed Shaolin monks were standing barring the way to the crowd of monks outside who were trying to get in. I walked gracefully up to the entrance, its hard to run in a sari. Still it

made for a stylish arrival, combined with nobody recognising me to begin with.

‘What is it?’ The Venerable Donald Chang, the Shaolin Abbott barked out as he swung round to look in my direction. ‘Madam Magistrate! What a pleasure’ He looked me up and down. ‘What a delightful... ethnic minorities dress... most becoming I am sure, a real pleasure to see you.’ I wasn’t sure about the “ethnic minorities” bit of what he said, it didn’t seem to fit with a Chinese monk’s speech. But before I could say anything more he carried on.

‘Most fortunate that you have arrived already, you are most punctual we had only summoned you a moment ago.’

‘We are not responding to your call but were coming on a separate matter what is going on?’

‘Take a look for yourself’ he said and gestured outside the gate.

‘Madam Magistrate, you must have the gate opened, we demand to be let in this is an outrage!’ Sheeladeepa’s voice bellowed out from the crowd.

‘Another outrage?’ I thought to myself, what now?

I went up to the gate and motioned to the guards to open it while I and Chopra stood in the way of the entrance into the Temple grounds.

‘What is it now Venerable Sheeladeepa?’ I said gently.

‘Madam, we have observed these Shaolin monks involved in anti-national activities in the Temple grounds, we demand the right to be let in to inspect what it is they are doing and why they are making unauthorised excavations in the temple courtyard.’

‘Anti-National activities is a serious allegation Sheeladeepa, what evidence do you have for this?’

Sheeladeepa pointed behind me towards the front of the temple where banks of earth and rock now stood surrounding the entrance to the temple. ‘What are they doing? Where is all this earth and rubble coming from? Why are they involving themselves in what looks as if it is unauthorised excavations?’

I looked incredulously at the piles of earth, sand and rubble, then I spotted piles of black volcanic sand heaped up against the Hindu temples to the Five Pandava brothers to the South of the Temple.

‘Venerable Chang, what are these signs of excavations? The court order only granted you the authority to supervise the temple, not make excavations. What are you doing?’

‘Merely, some minor works which we undertook to clean away rubbish left by the contractors employed by the Temple Management Committee. Nothing to concern yourself with.’

‘That’s for me to decide’ I said forcefully.

The Ambedkarite monks cheered. Venerable Sheeladeepa pressed forward and pointing his finger at the Venerable Chang called out.

‘They must be searched! They are robbing the temple and making off with the offerings which rightfully belong to us.’

‘We will not be searched’ said Chang falling back so that he was flanked by a group of his monks in what looked like a neat manoeuvre.

‘Venerable Chang, I must also ask you about another matter, why did you not report that a party of twelve pilgrims have overstayed their visas to the authorities?’

‘We are investigating that matter Madam Magistrate.’

I shook my head and stepped forward towards Chang and stared him in the eye. ‘Why did you not report that two of them had been killed?’

‘Two of them killed? Surely not, dear lady, they would have been found, the only murders round here have been of three Tibetan Lamas I understood, not two Chinese pilgrims.’

‘I see, so you also deny knowledge of Chinese pilgrims dressing as Lamas?’

He laughed and threw his head back and shook it in amazement.

‘Chinese dressing as Tibetan Lamas? Why would they do that?’

Suddenly Basudeo Ram one of the men who look after the shoes at the gate of the temple pushed to the front of the crowd outside the gate.

‘He’s lying! I saw them shoot the Lama with the camera. They shot him when he photographed them going down one of the excavations they have been digging.’

The crowd murmured and started to simmer with anger.

‘Basudeo, who shot the Lama? Did you see, where did you see from?’

Basudeo hung his head and in a low voice said. ‘Sometimes pilgrims leave lighted lamps burning on the outer walkway round the compound and I climb over in the evening to... help tidy up. I was there last night at about nine tidying up the offerings at the Tara temple when I heard a commotion outside. I hid inside quick smart

and peeped out. Three men dressed as Lamas were struggling with a fourth Lama who was the one who kept taking pictures of everything, said he was going to show the folks back on Amdo II what life in Bodh Gaya was like.’

‘What happened then Basudeo?’

‘There was an odd “crump” noise and the Amdo monk just crumpled up and fell down. Then the three Lamas spoke to each other and two of them dragged the body off towards the lotus pond and the third one made off with the camera.’ He paused, ‘wasn’t worth much anyhow, not worth stealing I’d reckon.’

‘And that is all is it Basudeo?’

‘No it ain’t, I overheard the monks talking after they shot him, they weren’t Tibetan folk at all, they was talking Chinese, its a disgrace, Chinese dressing up as Lamas, what kind of place is this Earth anyway that we have come to? In Hindustan Indians are Indian, Tibetans are Tibetans and Chinese are Chinese, and that’s the way it supposed to be.’

Venerable Chang had heard all of this, I stared at him.

‘These are serious allegations Venerable Chang, what do you have to say?’

The Venerable Chang consulted in Chinese with his colleagues on either side of him and then began to say.

‘At this time we have no comment...’ When suddenly Basudeo broke in ‘Eh? That’s the one who took the camera, I recognise his accent, he’s from Yunan district, can’t mistake that accent’.

Not a bumpkin after all this Basudeo I said to myself, then asked ‘Which one took the camera?’

Basudeo pointed at the Venerable Chang.

I stood up straight and tried to look as official as a woman in a red sari can do and began to say ‘Venerable Chang, I arrest you in the ...’ but I never finished the sentence. The crowd which had been simmering with anger outside the gate reached boiling point at that instant.

Like the Ganges in the monsoon bloated with the waters of the Himalayas breaking its banks, the ochre brown robed Ambedkarite monks surged through the entrance and started to flood into the compound. I and Chopra were swept to the side and managed to scramble up onto the platform around the Tara temple.

A strange scene unfolded before us, which perhaps had not been seen for a thousand years in the temple compound since the first Muslim invasions when the troops of the besieging army might have burst into the compound in a similar manner. I was counting my blessings that thankfully this was at least a peaceful occupation of the temple in the great tradition of Satyagraha that Gandhi had pioneered when India gained her freedom from the British. When I notice the Shaolin monks were dropping to the ground facing the Ambedkarites from behind the piles of earth and rubble round the temple.

‘Chopra, how soon till the backup forces get here?’

‘Still not left the station, Madam they won’t be here for another forty minutes at least.’

‘What?, I saw them on the way from the chopper, they should be almost here.’

Chopra grimaced.

‘Err, seems they got halfway here and realised they had forgotten their ammunition, they went back for it. They only just started coming back again for the second time a couple of minutes ago when they discovered the truck had a flat tyre, Constable Shashank reports that as soon as they find a spare they will be on their way.’

‘Find a spare?’ I threw up my arms in despair ‘Find a spare?’

I groaned, ‘Don’t tell me, spare tyres for the truck are “pending”, please.’

Chopra looked sheepishly at me ‘Okay I won’t tell you.’

The scope for any more disasters in our side seemed limited I thought.

But not in the Temple Compound where suddenly the Shaolin monks produced rifles from inside the temple and began to shoot into the air over the heads of the Ambedkarite monks.

The sea of invading monks seemed to part in response and with incredible swiftness peeled off and take up positions behind the ruins and monuments that littered the grounds of the Temple Complex.

‘Madam Magistrate, Deepa, take cover!’ Chopra cried as he flung himself at me and we collapsed in a heap inside the entrance to the Tara Temple.

Moments later machine gun fire raked across the wall where we had been standing.

‘What the Devil?’ I shouted and peeked out through a little gap in the brick work.

Things had taken a turn for the worse. It seemed that not only the Chinese but the Ambedkarites had come planning something more than a peaceful demonstration. From behind statues and stupas figures had thrown off robes to reveal the green camouflage uniforms of commandos from Birmingham.

‘Bugger, SAS, If I am not mistaken Madam’ Chopra shook his head ‘this is getting totally out of hand, we need to get out of here.’

‘But how Chopra, the chopper is the only way out and we can’t get to it, and we are going to be bloody lucky if it doesn’t get blown up.’

The fighting intensified with both sides laying down heavy fire, bullets ricocheted off the stones and here and there slumped figures began to litter the compound, like discarded prayer flags made in offerings to some unkind god. I thought that the Shaolin monks were going to have it all their own way from behind their defensive positions until with a great explosion and a cloud of smoke it became apparent that a group of SAS commandos had been creeping along the top of the old Hindu temples to the left side of the main entrance path and had leapt from the red temple roof onto the first level of the Main Temple.

The Shaolin monks had not planned on such an attack and had been outflanked, they retreated into the temple entrance.

Then to my horror I saw that Venerable Sheeladeepa was standing on the first floor balcony of the temple over its entrance. What did he think he was doing?

Seeing him standing there a hush filled the compound and then he spoke into a megaphone he was carrying with him.

‘Brothers! victory is within our grasp, total control of the temple, but victory is not yet ours, not until the Chinese get out of the temple.’ He paused and the crowd cheered wildly.

‘Brothers! I have a secret weapon, and I am prepared to use it if I need to.’

‘What the hell is he talking about Chopra?’ I said.

Chopra shook his head blankly, ‘Idiot or genius, makes no difference now, I have no idea, a secret weapon, where?’

As if in answer to Chopra's question, Seeladeepa pulled aside his robes and showed that his pot belly, was no such thing, rather it looked like some sort of device strapped to his belly.

'Brothers! I have here strapped to my body a nuclear bomb, and if we cannot have the temple, then nobody can! As long as I hold this trigger.' He held up his hand and the crowd roared thinking he was asking for adulation. 'The bomb will not go off, but, if I let go of it, then I and everything in the dome, and the dome will be destroyed in ten minutes. Chinese out! Either we get the temple or nobody does!'

The crowd took up a cry of.

'Chinese out! Chinese out! Chinese out! Out! Out! Out!'

Then the main entrance to the temple opened and the Venerable Donald Chang emerged bearing a white flag.

The crowd roared, then as Sheeladeepa waved at them quietened down.

In the eerie moment of silence I heard clear as a bell the sound of the Venerable Donald Chang's clipped English tones.

'I wish to discuss a surrender with Sheeladeepa and the Magistrate. Please both come forward.'

'I accept!' I shouted, we needed some police presence in this mess, after all my career was finished unless I managed to get a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

Chopra, shook his head as we walked past the groups of commandos crouched behind the monuments. 'Madam, if Sheeladeepa lets go of that trigger, we are all finished, take care.' He whispered to me under his breath 'good luck'.

At the doorway to the temple we made a strange sight.

Like the goddess Durga dressed in red and gold I stood in the centre of a strange tableau: on my right the khaki clad uniformed figure of Chopra, absent mindedly twirling his handlebar moustaches; on my left the ochre brown robed figure of Sheeladeepa holding up his hand as if in a strange salute to me, clutching the trigger to the bomb. So it was that we stepped together inside the entrance and stood in the antechamber to the main shrine room side by side. Facing the main image in the central shrine. A golden seated Buddha which had stood there through all the destruction for more than a thousand years. Watching whilst Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus has squabbled over control of the shrine. Waiting, perhaps, just for this last day to come.

‘I regret Madam Magistrate, that there has been a deception.’

The Venerable Donald Chang said, standing framed behind the arch of the doorway to the main shrine room flanked on either side by one of his grey robed assistants.

‘A deception?’ Venerable Sheeladeepa cried.

‘Yes, my name is not “the Venerable” Donald Chang.’

As he said this his hands reached up and he pulled aside his robes which fell to his feet in a pile of grey cloth. Revealing a dark blue military uniform with red stars on his shoulder epaulets.

‘My name is General Chang of the Peoples’ Liberation Army of Shaolin.’ He smiled at me. ‘Under different circumstances Madam Magistrate we might have been allies.’ He turned to Venerable Sheeladeepa.

‘Venerable Sheeladeepa, have I understood you correctly to say that in ten minutes if your finger leaves the trigger you are holding the nuclear bomb strapped to your body will explode?’

‘Yes’ roared Sheeladeepa, ‘One false move and you die, enemy of the Dhamma.’

General Chang laughed, and quietly spoke.

‘How inconvenient for you that you will not live to see the Temple and all your dreams destroyed, it is a delicious irony.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sheeladeepa said in incredulity.

In answer General Chang shouted an order to his assistants. One pressed a button on the wall by his side and grey translucent doors began to slide in from each side of the entrance way closing it off. The other reached under his robes and pulled out an antique, but deadly, AK47 and sprayed a round in our direction.

Sheeladeepa’s body convulsed as the bullets riddled him through and he fell to the floor letting go of the trigger as he fell.

Suddenly General Chang’s attention turned to me, for an instant he looked quizzically at the hail of bullets bouncing off my deflector field which had activated as soon as the firing began.

The last thing I saw of him was him smiling at me as all at once the shrine room disappeared from in front of me as it appeared to sink down into the ground. I stepped forward and looked through the translucent barrier at the rapidly dropping shape and the shaft it revealed.

‘Damn, a lift shaft, what the hell.’

‘Madam Magistrate’ Chang’s voice came over my comm link channel.

‘May I say it was wise of you to have taken the precaution of wearing a personal deflector field to protect you, but do not trust it to protect you from Sheeladeepa’s nuclear bomb.’

He paused and chuckled.

‘Also we cannot predict the effects of the launch of the space ship of the Previous Buddha Aliens which my men have liberated and are at this moment preparing for take off. So it would be wise to get out of here as soon as possible, I hope we may meet again in the future.’

‘Damn you Chang!’ I cried ‘We will meet again, even if I have to follow you to the gates of hell.’

I spun round, almost knocking into Chopra who had been standing behind me when the Chinese fired and so had escaped their bullets. We ran hell for leather out of the temple.

‘Evacuate! Evacuate! Sheeladeepa has been killed, the bomb will detonate in less than ten minutes!’

Pandemonium broke out, the monks in the compound melted away in moments as they rushed to get to their monastery space ships and escape the coming inferno.

I pulled up my skirts and made a dash for the chopper, unladylike, but bloody necessary. Besides nobody was watching now as mud splashed onto the smooth skin of my calves and thighs. As we jumped in Chopra fired up the engine and we shot up into the sky. I never knew the chopper could go that fast. But it still seemed to take for ever to reach the station. I could see the different monasteries separating gantries and walkways which linked their ships to their ground facilities. Nobody was taking time to make an organised departure. All that mattered was the ticking of the clock on the countdown to Armageddon for Bodh Gaya.

One thing turned out well at least, in the end it would have been a disaster if my forces had been at the temple compound, they would have all died in the explosion. This way they had been able to turn around only moments after finally leaving the compound and head back to the ship and prepare it for lift off. We were the last to get on board Bijlirani.

Eyebrows were raised as I slumped into my seat on the bridge of the ship. My hair had come loose and was flowing in long tresses around

my shoulders. My sari was now dishevelled and showing perhaps more of my midriff than I would have liked. My brow was beaded with sweat from the last nightmare dash along the access tunnel into the ship. My bosom heaved as I breathed deeply after the exertion and a drop of sweat ran down my nose and fell off the end and onto my stomach where it rolled slowly down over the curves of my tummy to settle in my belly button.

I looked around me at the staring eyes of my crew.

‘Never seen a woman before?’ I checked the clock ‘If we don’t get out of here in three minutes I can promise you this, you will never see a woman again, MOVE!’

They moved, and we lifted off.

Three minutes later as we boosted at maximum G up towards orbit we felt a perceptible shudder in the ship. But that was all, we had made it before the blast.

Four minutes into the lift the rockets cut out and the AG drive kicked in. As the G force disappeared we all scrambled to look at the monitors and see what was happening on the ground.

Sheeladeepa had not been joking about his bomb.

The dome was torn apart, the landscape flattened all around.

The blast had revealed a circular grey disc centred where the temple had been. Perhaps five hundred metres or so in diameter the readings suggested. Tradition spoke of this disk, the “Adamantine Disk”, which was the reason why this spot was never shaken by any disaster or calamity, the Vajra Mandala. Scholars had always concluded it was a myth, even eye witness accounts of it by ancient Chinese pilgrims like Huen Tsang were dismissed as obvious fantasy. Yet here it was, untouched by a nuclear explosion.

‘Well I’ll be damned, what is that thing Chopra?’

Chopra checked the readings and shook his head ‘Not the faintest idea.’

He checked again, ‘but whatever it is its starting to radiate energy at a fantastic rate.’

Gradually the grey colour of the surface changed to hues of cobalt and manganese blue and ripple patterns started to flow out from its centre. For an instant it seemed as if it began to change shape. Then I realised it was changing shape, the centre seemed to be rising and it began to assume the form of a domed structure with spires on its apex

and the dome riding on a drum shape half as high as the dome. As the whole thing was at least 500 metres in diameter that meant big, it must have been one and half kilometres high at least to the topmost pennant like structures.

‘Its a flipping mile high stupa!’ Chopra yelled.

In truth it looked like nothing so much as the ancient Buddhist monuments which had once stood at places such as Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati. Except that unlike them it was spinning and lights and patterns of light were pulsating over its surface as if it were made of all the seven precious metals and inlaid with gems, coral and amethysts. The spires at the top began to glow brighter and a beam of brilliant light began to shoot from its peak towards the zenith of the heavens.

‘Deepa, its moving, sensor readings indicate that it is starting to lift off from the surface.’ Uravashi looked up from her monitor and puzzled said. ‘The ascent is at a rate of only a few metres a minute at the moment but its picking up speed as it rises.’

‘Must be using an AG drive to lift so slowly from the surface, but its so massive the gravity well fluctuations don’t effect it so it can make a controlled AG ascent.’ Chopra grinned, ‘Neat.’

Neat did not really describe it all.

How can you describe an iridescent scintillating mass of lights that is rising up a column of light as if bridging the gap between earth and heaven in one mighty step? It was indescribable.

‘Uravashi’ Chopra called out, ‘check the sensors on solar wind activity, there are abnormal readings being reported.’

‘Check, Chopra, its not just readings, look at the monitors.’

We all turned and checked the monitors from the North Polar Solar System Observation system. From them you got a birds eye view of the whole inner Solar system. The column of light from the stupa ship was somehow energising the stellar gases and dusts all around the sun as far out already as the orbit of Mars. The whole thing looked like nothing so much as a vortex of swirling gases like a miniature spiral galaxy.

‘Estimates of danger from Solar Activity Uravashi?’ I queried.

‘None so far Madam Deepa, within acceptable tolerances for this ship.’

‘What about the other ships?’ Chopra asked.

The Tibetan, Chinese and Singhalese ships were also all rising up into orbit and we formed a kind of loose square flanking the column of light in all four cardinal directions.

‘Where the hell is the Ambedkarite ship?’ I asked Uravashi.

Uravashi frowned, her dark eyebrows drawn into a bow shape above her almond eyes.

‘Sorry Madam, seems they didn’t manage to get off before the blast, we have had no communications from them.’

‘So the other ships are hailing us?’

‘Yes Madam, but they are all busy monitoring the situation at the moment, they all report their systems functioning within normal tolerances.’

‘Good, lets hope it stays that way.’ I sighed. Never speak too soon eh?

‘Geshe-La is hailing you captain, shall I put him on?’ Uravashi said.

‘Okay’ I replied, ‘Shit’ I thought to myself ‘should I have said audio only.’

Too late, the image of Geshe-La’s face appeared on the main screen and he was looking at mine.

‘Madam Magistrate, I am glad that your ship got away safely are all your personnel safe and accounted for?’

‘Yes, and yours?’

‘Sadly a small contingent did not make it to the ship on time. I regret to say that they must be dead now.’

‘My condolences to you Geshe-La.’

‘Thank you, they were Snow Leopard freedom fighters who died in the service of Tibet and will be remembered as martyrs in the struggle against the Chinese.’

‘Eh?’

‘Madam, Deepa, I regret to inform you that I knew about the Chinese activities but had not informed you before hand.’

‘What, Geshe-La you disappoint me, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I was under orders and could not disobey monastic authority on this matter.’

He sighed.

‘Some months ago our spies on Shaolin reported peculiar events at some of the labour camps.’

‘Labour camps?’ I asked, ‘What labour camps?’

‘It is not so widely known but Shaolin has been run by the so called Peoples Liberation Army since soon after its founding. They are ruthless in suppressing what they see as opposition to their will. Regrettably that includes a total ban on anything other than a sham form of Buddhism on Shaolin.

He shook his head, ‘Deepa, that is a tale for another time what matters is we came to know that they were interested in the Previous Buddhas as they thought that if they could steal one of their star ships they could appropriate its technology and gain superiority over Wu-Tai and Sukhavati. It seems that the delegation they sent to Bodh Gaya had this as their sole aim.’

‘Geshe-La’ I sighed, ‘why didn’t you tell me? Think of all the months of working in the dark I have had to do, would it have been too much to tell me?’

‘Madam, the orders not to tell you came not from my government initially but your own. Krishnalal Paswan himself signed the order I was sent.’

‘God damn him’ I bit my lip ‘pardon my language Geshe-La, double crossed by my own government, I guess I should have expected that.’

Sadly not only the courts but democracy on Hindustan was Byzantine in its plots and counter plots. I knew that Malhotra was not in the Paswan group, so I guess it shouldn’t have surprised me that I was not informed. Come to think of it that might also have explained the Ministers total lack of interest in funding the building of the Police Headquarters, he was only interested in Bodh Gaya until the Previous Buddha’s space ship had been found.

‘So why was everybody keeping silent if they knew the Shaolin monks were a sham?’ I asked with my brow furrowed by perplexity.

‘Madam, how do you say, “set a thief to catch a thief” is a saying I believe in English, everybody was watching the Shaolin group’s every action, and hoping that once they had found the ship to steal it out from under their noses so to speak.’

I sensed there was yet more to this and blurted out, ‘So how did the Chinese dressed as Lamas get killed?’

‘A regrettable incident, they observed themselves being observed by the Snow Leopards, who were disguised’ he almost whispered ‘as I am sorry to say as Ambedkarite monks.’

‘And.’

‘It was necessary to ensure they did not tell the Shaolin group that the Ambedkarites included Tibetan secret service Snow Leopard agents.’

‘Necessary?’ I said raising my eyebrows in horror.

‘But regrettable, Madam, sadly the heroes of that incident have themselves now been martyred in a last attempt to discomfort the enemy.’

‘You are trying to tell me that case is now closed, yes?’

Geshe-La chuckled, ‘I think there are now, how do you say, “bigger fish to fry”, Madam magistrate, something is happening to the column of light, we will speak again later.’ He leaned forward as if to turn off the comm link and then paused as if going to say something and added. ‘Deepa, may I say that you look like the very image of a guardian deity goddess in your outfit today, most refreshing, Tashi-Dalek.’

He broke the link. ‘Tashi-Dalek to you too mate’ I said to myself under my breath, staring around at the flight deck. Wondering which of my companions was loyal to me and which to the Paswan faction.

The stupa ship was now in a geo-stationary orbit above Bodh Gaya and as it came to rest in orbit its form began to alter again. The lower rings of the drum began to spin out and separate into a ring formation linked by twelve spokes to the central dome which was now revealed as a sphere, like a glowing golden egg. It looked like nothing as much as a great twelve spoke cartwheel turning in the heavens over the Earth.

‘Energy levels from the artefact are rising’ Uravashi said ‘something is about to happen I think.’

As if taking her words as a cue the central sphere opened like a flower to reveal, like a reliquary casket at its centre a cylinder, perhaps three hundred metres long and about fifty metres in diameter.

‘Good god’ Chopra cried out. ‘It looks like one of the Previous Buddha’s Cylinder ships from the Tau Ceti images.’

We gazed in awe at the site of a wheel turning in space with the Cylinder ship as its axle.

All of a sudden we noticed a lustre growing on the bridge. A brilliant golden glow began to suffuse everything and to coalesce into a patch of radiance that hovered in the midst of the bridge. I stared dumbfounded at an impossible vision.

The light seemed to flow into, and out of, one location hovering about three feet above the deck. It gradually took on human form. But what kind of a human? Dressed in flowing white robes a figure stood before us with long white hair like a halo floating around a serene visage of a handsome young man with deep staring eyes. He was holding in his hands a kind of lute which he began to pluck and I began to be able to hear a kind of heavenly music in my mind. The melodic sounds, or thoughts, I could not tell what they were, were broken by a kind of clear ringing sound and I heard in my head.

‘Greetings, Gods and Goddesses, Gandharvas and Nagas, Sons and Daughters of good families, thank you for acquiring a Vishvakarma brand singularity gateway. Used properly it should serve you for incalculable aeons of inter galactic travel, please read the manual carefully before operating.’

The figure played a little trilling melody on the lute then continued.

‘This user manual communication brought to you by Panchasikha inter-species translation services, we apologise for any cultural context confusion in the translation. For online help please contact your local area representative deity at your nearest Buddha field centre.’

The image began to fade and I looked in astonishment at Chopra who was staring wide eyed and with an open mouth at the figure.

Suddenly the image came back into focus, but it now began to pulsate with a red and green light.

‘Warning! Warning! Incorrect gate sequence activation, please delay launch until appropriate phase of solar planetary alignment. Warning, the manufacturers do not provide a new solar system for old warranty with this device. Destruction of star system immanent if gate implementation continued in this alignment.’

‘Vishvakarma Enterprises regrets any inconvenience caused by the destruction of this solar system due to incorrect operation of this gateway. Please see the user manual on planetary phase alignment before attempting to operate this device, or evacuate this solar system immediately. Thank you again for using a Vishvakarma singularity gateway.’

‘Shit! Prepare to initiate drive systems’ I called out, ‘lets get out of here.’

Uravashi, Chopra and Deepak began frantically getting the drive systems online. As they did so the light from the great spinning wheel in the heavens started to shift from golden to an eldritch lime green tinge.

‘Initiating implementation sequence’ Chopra cried out, ‘Insertion into hyper space in five seconds.’

For an age it seemed that time stood still, lost in an eternity of consciousness stripped of all thought of the past and the future we saw moment by moment as the green glow built to a crescendo and a beam of light leapt from the ring in the direction of the sun. As it touched the sun’s corona the sun’s surface seemed to start to boil and impossible amounts of gases began to be flung off in shock wave after shock wave. The Cylinder ship, like an arrow sped along the beam of light on a direct collision course with the sun. In the last instant before we inserted into hyperspace I watched it crash into the sun, like a bullet in the chest, like an arrow in the heart of the sun. The ship quaked, rocked, rolled, shook, shuddered and trembled, under my feet in the microsecond before normal space disappeared and we inserted into the artificial hyperspace wormhole generated by the drive.

We made the transmission okay. The ship systems purred in the background with a reassuring humming sound that indicated things were probably fine.

‘Systems check Uravashi,’ I called out in a worried tone to get confirmation.

‘Systems check, all systems operating at optimal parameters Madam’.

I breathed a sigh of relief, whatever had happened had not damaged us.

‘I hope everybody got the same warning and got away as well,’ Chopra said staring at the now blank monitors in front of his console station.

‘Estimated transition time frame?’ I asked looking over at Uravashi whose fingers were dancing over the input sensors. She looked up and grinned.

‘Two hours and twenty seven minutes before re-insertion.’

Chopra swung round, ‘And where may I ask will we be re-inserting into conventional space?’

‘Near the site of the former star Tau Ceti, about eight light years from the Solar System.’

Chopra shook his head, ‘Make that from the former site of the Solar System Uravashi.’

‘Are you saying...’ I said incredulously.

Chopra frowned, ‘Yes, looks like a similar effect to that recorded at Tau Ceti, that weird apparition thing, what did it call itself a “user manual”? Was not joking. The shock waves that hit the ship as we inserted were from the sun going Nova.’

An hour later we sat in a stunned silent circle round the conference room table having all taken a break to catch our breath, change our clothes as well in my case to a more regular appearance for a DM on duty.

Not much happens in hyper, or worm hole, space. Well, that is that anybody has ever reported, now and then a ship never comes back, but nobody knows why. The most popular theory is that rather than being lost in worm hole space very occasionally ships re-enter space in unexpected places. Like, in a star for instance. Which is why they are never found. In part the silence round the table was shock at the events of the last day. In part fear that the shock waves that buffeted the ship might have knocked our insertion point off course and that we might share a similar fate.

‘Colleagues, first we need to review, Uravashi, what is your executive summary of recent events?’

‘Sheeladeepa murdered, previous Buddhas Space Ship stolen by Peoples Liberation Army, destruction of Bodh Gaya Temple, destruction of Old Earth, destruction of Solar System. Present status en-route to site of former Star System of Tau Ceti III.’ She paused then added, ‘In short, total disaster.’

‘I cannot agree’ I said, ‘We are all safe and that at least is something.’

‘Will the inquiry in New Patliputra say the same thing though?’ Deepak asked.

It was a good question. Our brief was to protect the safety and security of our command area. The total destruction of it would not look good. I was finished. I might be formerly exonerated of blame, in fact I would use the way the true situation had been hidden from me to make sure of that. But, I would still end up the DM of a minor

agricultural settlement in the backwoods of the Australis region I reckoned.

In particular allowing the theft and destruction of the Previous Buddha's Space Ship was not really forgivable. A priceless treasure had slipped from our hands at the last moment and been consumed in the stellar meltdown.

'Is there any chance of going back and trying to retrieve debris from the Nova site? It might at least allow us to save something from this. Going back empty handed is going to look bad.' I asked Chopra, 'Check the scans again please to see if it is worth us jumping back to Sol again.'

Chopra started to run the scans again.

'Madam' Uravashi chimed in, 'you cannot be serious, we can't go and start sifting through the debris of a nova, it will be decades before it is safe to return.'

I nodded, 'Well it will be decades before we can safely return to Patliputra as well if we have nothing to show for our efforts, except the destruction of that which was put into our care. Its a long shot but its all we have for the moment.'

Chopra waved his hand back and forth then pointed at the scan as he froze the image in the moment when the Cylinder ship impacted with the sun.

'No, no it isn't, look there, the surface of the sun's corona is at mark 104.578, but the front of the ship disappears at mark 104.575, a three nanosecond difference.'

'Your point?' Uravashi said tersely, 'surely it just vaporised in the heat?'

'No that's what the General Chang wants us to think, I think that it went into some kind of hyperspace drive the instant before it would have vaporised.'

This sounded promising, maybe the chicken had flown the roost but we could still follow it.

'Sounds good to me' I said. I imagined for a moment returning to Patliputra with nothing or with General Chang under arrest and the Previous Buddha's Space Ship. The choice was clear, my name mud in the dirt for a hundred generations, the DM who allowed Earth to be destroyed, or my fame shining bright like a banner, the DM who

pulled a rabbit from the hat and snatched victory, along with an alien space ship, from the jaws of defeat. It was a no brainer of a choice.

‘We will pursue it, if it exists we must capture it, and General Chang to boot.’

Hum, I thought, one last point though.

‘Where was the ship headed? What was its trajectory Chopra?’

He finished his calculations and looked up with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Towards Fomalhaut.’

‘That’s where we are going too then,’ I slammed my left hand down on the console and waved my finger in the air pointing at the forward view screen.

‘As soon as... we have been to the site of Tau Ceti that is.’

‘Uravashi, plot a course from our projected insertion into normal space on to Fomalhaut, plot the best course you can too, I want to get there before Chang if that is possible.’

It might be possible too, there was no way to tell what speed the alien Cylinder ship made through hyperspace, or whatever it travelled through. But, I knew that “Lightning Queen” was the name of our ship for a good reason. It featured the latest in Bose drives and had a high degree of redundancy built in. But, Bose drives had one limitation, even the latest took ten minutes to charge, and five seconds to activate. We had a triple drive array, that meant five seconds after emerging into normal space we could reinsert into hyperspace. What’s more by the time we emerged again we normally, if it was a jump of more than ten minutes duration, had the first drive charged up ready to go. In theory we could make an almost infinite series of jumps at five second intervals. The third drive you ask? It was a back up, and it enabled us to reinsert a second time straightaway if the jump was less than ten minutes duration. This ability came at a cost, Bose drives cost a fortune, Bijlirani cost the same as three normal Bose drive space ships.

Two hours a tense hush filled the bridge in the moment before the transition. In the near silence you could hear the way we were all straining to hear the faint change in the background hum. The sound of a ship functioning in hyperspace always struck me as a kind of sweet low rumble, like the feeling of silk on the skin. In normal space the sound changes to something less exotic, like the white noise background hiss of an old analogue comm system.

Uravashi checked the monitor and whispered, 'Transition in three, two, one.'

'Zero,' as the last sound left her lips it faded into the sound of a background hiss. The external sensors fed data to the monitors and we saw a star field set against the blackness of space. A perceptible sigh ran round the bridge.

'Successful transition into normal space,' Uravashi shook her head.

'Point zero two light years from the ...location of ... Tau Ceti.'

'All systems report normal,' Chopra called in.

'Clear for reinsertion' I said gazing at the stars in the darkness ahead.

'Check, five, four, three, two, one, zero.'

No shakes or shudders this time just the utter darkness of hyperspace and the hum of the ship slipping through hyperspace. As smooth as silk.

Orbiting Fomalhaut: 9/12/2645 20:35

'Yes, the artefact is out there! Invert Iridium in the 14 metre band.'

I breathed a sigh of relief, the journey had not been in vain, we were approaching the artefact's location.

'Natasha, I still can't get a visual fix on the artefact, any suggestions?'

'Chandra, get back in the bloody ship! We can manipulate the images better from in here, maybe we will have got a positive ID by the time you make it back in.'

'Bugger' I said to myself, 'better get back inside.' I closed the inspection cover and as I did so I thought I saw for a moment the image of a ring of light reflected on its surface.

As I strode back along the walkway my legs began pounding on the track, like a runner breaking into a sprint, as an idea came to me. I swung through the hatch into the airlock and hit the close panel with excessive force full of enthusiasm.

'Got it yet?' I said as I hurtled round the doorway that marked the entrance to the control centre. Natasha was standing by the main visual console staring at its very centre, she turned around and shook her head. I rushed over and swept her up in my arms and spun her round in the air. 'I've seen it!' I cried out.

‘Whoa! Down boy! Put me down you idiot. What have you seen? The artefact? Where is it?’ Natasha slipped from my embrace and left my arms embracing empty space. I was a foot taller than her at least and my body was tall and athletic, hers was slender and petite. She shook her head so her bob haircut fell into place. I ran my hands through my unruly curls as I sought to regain my composure after my display of excessive emotion.

‘Sorry about that Natasha, just got carried away a bit there, check the monitors again, its there as plain as the nose on your face.’ Natasha wiggled her cute little button like nose which had a ring inset in one nostril, ‘what it looks like a nose?’ She giggled and turned around and looked at the image.’

‘No like your nose ring, Natasha, look!’

We had been searching for a tiny point source for the spectrum emissions and so whilst we stared into empty space we missed the artefact. It wasn’t a point source, it was a ring which was pretty much face on to us at the moment, slightly at an angle actually so it looked like an ellipse which covered two thirds of the screen. Also it was much bigger than what we had been looking for.

‘Estimated diameter of ring is 108 kilometres, thickness of ring rim one point two kilometres, shape of ring profile, round.’ Rom said looking up from the comm station. ‘Very interesting structure Dr Chandra, Ms Natasha. Its like the tunnels on Tau Ceti III but curved into a ring shape.’

‘How far are we from it Rom?’ David asked as he walked into the control centre.

‘Nearest point on the ring to our present position is fourteen point six kilometres.’

‘Can we get closer to it? I asked Rom. Rom ran most of the ship guidance systems as he was able to control it pretty much like an extension of his body as his neural net and the ships were meshed as long as he was in control of ship systems.

‘Possible Dr Chandra, but inadvisable, our own ship is over two kilometres long and it may interact in an unpredictable way with the alien structure.’

David pointed at the scans as he ran them round the surface of the ring.

‘Look, the inner surface has a number of structures in it which are in the plane of the ring, but no clear junction points. The outer surface though seems to have six major housings of some kind at equal distances round it. Just like, the arrangement on Tau Ceti, these people liked things in sixes it seems.’

‘Rom zoom in on the structure which is nearest to us at the moment, I think I can see something of interest in it.’

‘There’ I said, ‘Look familiar?’

‘Affirmative Dr Chandra, it fits the dimensions for one of the Cylinder ships. Length three hundred meters, diameter fifty metres.’

‘Check the other structures for similar ships.’

‘Checking...’ Rom fell silent for a moment devoting all his attention to the remote sensors arrayed across the ship’s surface.

‘Check complete, two structures not in view, number of docked Cylinder ships visible twenty two, estimated total number in the range of twenty five to thirty five.’

‘What do you reckon guys?’ Natasha said, ‘fancy a trip over in the shuttle?’

“Once bitten twice shy” is an old saying, not sure exactly what it means really, but it summed up my attitude this time. The first shuttle missions were not to dock with the artefact but to survey it more completely. None of us wanted to repeat our mistake on Tau Ceti III and rush in without checking carefully first. We spent twenty hours making seven missions to survey the artefact, which we began to call ‘The Ring’ by the third mission. The name stuck.

Turned out the housings, docks we decided to call them, had five bays on each of them arrayed a round a central square. There are thirty three ships docked. That left two docks without any ships at them. Both on the dock situated at the furthest point on the ring from us. Each dock was a kind of circular platform that projected out about three hundred metres from the surface of the ring and ended in a circular field. The structures that were on each dock were a maze of towers, gantries and cubes, to all intents and purposes like the ship yards we had seen on Tau Ceti III, but this time under naked space instead of inside of inside a cavern, they even had the same central squares and building arrangements. Apart from that nothing differentiated one dock from the other. Nor yet any other feature of the ring. Its outer surface was blank apart from the six docks. Its inner

surface was lined with continuous mechanical structures that repeated over and over again, three hundred and sixty arrays of spires and dishes the purpose of which was completely unclear to us. There was no evident command centre or other feature which indicated that any particular place on the ring would make a better place to land on than other. It was rotating at sufficient speed we reckoned to simulate a gravity of about 1.2 earth masses on the inner surface. Which would approximate to the gravity on Tau Ceti III.

‘Rom send a probe with all the data we have gathered so far on the ring back to Jefferson.’ I said to Rom as we all sat in the control centre.

‘Probe despatched Dr Chandra,’ Rom said a moment later.

‘This way guys even if we muck up big time again somebody will eventually know what we have discovered. The pity is that they won’t hear for two years at the speed the probe moves at, still we have done our duty.’ I said and David nodded.

‘We can also send back up a probe with all the data up to the moment we gain entry to the ring, Rom can you see that happens?’

‘Affirmative Mr David I will monitor all recordings up to the moment of entry and send the data back, may I point out that we may be able to relay data from inside the ship as well and I will ensure that regular data downloads are carried out if possible.’

David sighed, ‘Seems unlikely to me, our scanners cannot penetrate the ring’s structure which suggests that signals won’t be able to get out either, still we will try.’

‘Okay, if we are going to adopt an ultra cautious approach I suggest that the first contact be just to land at the dock and investigate the exterior and then once we have thoroughly investigated it to try and find a way into the interior.’

‘Mind you there is one possibility you are not considering.’ Natasha added.

‘Ms Natasha, what is that?’ Rom enquired.

‘Perhaps it does not have an interior, our scans don’t read anything inside, couldn’t that indicate that it is solid.’

Emily broke in, ‘I don’t think so the gravitational field of the object does not indicate that the mass is solid, unless it has a very low density inside that is not much higher than a gas. I think it must have an interior.’

‘What worries me is not it not having an interior’ I frowned, ‘but how to investigate a tunnel that long on foot.’

Emily coughed ‘Chandra, I think that’s right the ring is 108 kilometres in diameter that makes its inner circumference around 340 kilometres. Even without complications, at five k an hour for twelve hours a day that is 60 k a day, its going to take around a week at that rate to get round the ring on foot. Its just not practical. I reckon that we will only be able to investigate around the area of the docks. It will be a major trek to get round the inside of the ring.’

‘It may just repeat any how, the same in each section, it won’t be that big inside’ Natasha suggested.

I remembered that comment later, and laughed to myself about it eventually, we had forgotten one other option about the shape of the interior. I think Sherlock Holmes once said “One you eliminate the unlikely you are left with the impossible”, I could have done with following his advice now and then on this journey.

‘Dr Chandra, may I remind you there is no need to enter the interior initially I recommend sending a type four probe inside.’

Rom was right of course, to begin with nobody was going inside at all, no trekking through the interior as we had done on Tau Ceti would be needed. Or so we thought.

Orbiting Fomalhaut: 18/12/2645 20:10

With a slight click the shuttle touched down on the dock surface. We had landed on a spot where probes had previously landed safely. It was on a plaza, between the buildings at its perimeter and the domed building that stood at its centre.

‘Looks familiar eh folks?’ I said gazing out at a wide square lined with two storey buildings.

David nodded his head, ‘One difference Chandra, no remains of a tree this time.’

‘Of course I should have realised there was something missing, I wonder why?’

Natasha looked with astonishment at me, ‘Ever tried growing a tree in a vacuum?’

‘Okay, that’s a point, not a good place to grow a tree.’

Not good soil either, in fact no soil whatsoever, instead every surface was the translucent grey compound, here and there with more metallic

alloys in it, here and there with more silicon in it. But this time we couldn't find any switches to activate anything to begin with. Remotes sensing probes mapped in detail the area. We began to understand the layout. The shipyards were just that, probably warehouses, supply stores and the like as they would have been situated in the right locations to act as ground support for the ships. The buildings around the square were, at our best guess offices and accommodation. Sadly the Previous Buddhas love of grey was continued everywhere, but where were the control pads to activate things. We could not find anything. This was a pity, no doors would open and there were no windows that we could look through, to be honest we could only guess at the functions of the buildings and structures based on a theory that they came and went in the space ships but that they also went inside the ring via the central lift housing.

In this version of the plaza it had no upward extension. Rather it was a circular building, about two storeys high, it had an inner drum with inset blank window and door panels in it, and was surrounded by twelve columns. The columns supported the roof which formed a kind of veranda around the structure. The roof was a dome, bare and without ornamentation apart from twelve ribs that curved in to the centre where there was a kind of round bobble on the top. The doors to the building were closed, there were no control panels anywhere, we checked I assure you.

'Do you think they used "remotes", like I saw once in a museum to turn Televisions on and off, to open the doors here?' Emily suggested the next day at breakfast.

'In which case the problem is somebody forgot to leave the remote with the set eh?' David laughed.

'That's not such a silly idea guys,' Natasha said looking at David and Emily.

'Maybe we could simulate the signals from a remote operating device and see if we can open any doors.'

For two days we bombarded the places near doors where control panels should by rights be with every kind of thing we could think of. Infra-red, radio, short wave, microwave, visible light (although we thought that was unlikely), gamma rays, X rays, everything. We tried pulses, bursts, broad spectrum signals, focused signals. Not a sausage. Nothing worked.

On the third day Natasha had a gleam in her eye as we got out of the shuttle on the plaza. She was the last to get out of the ship and as she did so I saw she was carrying a sledgehammer.

‘Natasha! What are you intending to do, don’t tell me you are going to ...’

‘Try and knock a door down?’ You bet, we have tried everything else this is our last option I reckon.’

David chuckled, ‘Well Chandra, maybe now we have tried the subtle approach this is the time, in fact if this doesn’t work, we could try drills and lasers next.’

I didn’t like to tell them that I had already tried but felt to embarrassed to admit it. Drills and lasers made no impact on the material whatsoever, not even absorbing any of the energy, drills didn’t bite, even diamond ones, and lasers were just reflected off the surface.

To begin with rather than trying to bash down the lift shaft doors we tried one of the doors in the square, Natasha picked it at random as it was nearest to the shuttle.

She swung the hammer at the left side of the door. It bounced off. She swung the hammer at the centre of the door. It bounced off. She swung it at the right side, it bounced off.

‘No luck eh Natasha?’ Emily said grinning behind the visor of her helmet.

‘Grrr,’ Natasha growled and began to stamp her feet in a fit of impotent rage at the sheer idiocy of being so close to the interior and yet so totally unable to get inside.

David started to chuckle when as Natasha slammed down her foot for a third time really hard, the door swung in and revealed a doorway.

‘Touch sensitive door mats!’ David cried, ‘Shit why didn’t we try that before!’

The inside was a disappointment.

A bare cubical with a counter a third of the way back that ran about three quarters of the way across and width of the cubical leaving a way to walk behind the counter. I walked behind the counter and leaning my elbows on it said.

‘Welcome to the Previous Buddha Aliens information centre.’

It was a hollow joke. The interior told us nothing. No furniture, no fittings, just the bare shell of what might have been a shop or an enquiry office. Nor yet did any other door on the plaza reveal anything very different. Some turned out to have kind of store rooms at the back, maybe they were shops, some single chambers, maybe they were offices. That was all.

There was one difference at the ship yards. The buildings were all empty inside, all fairly uninformative about their purposes. The difference was that the ship doors still didn't open however hard we jumped up and down in front of them. Evidently they were opened in another way. We never found out how.

The next day we came back and tried the lift shaft housing. This time the door opened first try. Inside was a lift with just two symbols on a control panel by the door, a triangle pointing upwards above a triangle pointing downwards.

'Well, are we going down then?' Natasha said stepping forward.

I grabbed her and pulled her back.

'No!' I said emphatically. 'First we send probe down.'

In fact we decided to first get off the structure all together. I really didn't want anything to go wrong this time.

From the control centre on the Garuda we watched through the sensors on the probe as it extended a manipulator and pressed the down button. As the doors closed we saw the triangle glow yellow and the location gyros on the probe indicated that it began to descend below the dock surface. We watched in rapt attention as the lift came to a halt some hundreds of metres down, in the heart of the structure. The signal was attenuated but still getting through. The door opened and revealed a strange sight.

Through the lift door we could a mass of machinery. As the probe moved forward out of the lift into what looked like a forest of machine parts one part of the forest seem to separate and come forward to meet the probe. The last data the probe sent back was apparently either of it running into a strange distorting mirror, or of it being greeted by something that looked just like itself.

We ran the sequence over and over again trying to make sense of it. Sensor malfunction? But the diagnostics on the sensor read correctly up to the moment that contact was lost. Some kind of distorting visual field inside the artefact? But the individual parts of the scene

included, internal parts of the probe, which featured in the images as external parts of the “forest” scene as we saw it. Finally, why did the transmission cease apparently at the moment that the other probe contacted it? The general consensus was that our probe must have been destroyed by the other probe. Our provisional conclusions were that, first of all it was just as well we had not taken this lift down, there was something waiting to greet us this time, and second that we were not sure if we wanted to meet what was down there. In fact David and Emily insisted that we moved the ship back from close proximity to the artefact as we began to wonder if we wanted to meet the Alien probe if it came out to meet us.

Situated about a million miles from the ring a little later in the day we started to wonder if we might not have over reacted.

‘Dr Chandra, all crew members, alert report to control centre immediately.’ Rom’s voice broke into my reverie as I took an afternoon nap pondering over all that had taken place. I was in the control centre in no time it seemed. So were the rest of the crew.

‘What’s up Rom?’

‘Incoming vessel emerged from hyperspace from hyperspace two minute ago. Whatever it is it reinserted into normal space about two billion miles out and its heading straight towards the artefact, anticipated arrival at artefact in two point three seven minutes.’

‘Visual?’ I queried.

‘Not yet within visual range, anticipated visual contact in ten seconds.’

They were a long ten seconds.

‘Visual contact. Onscreen now.’

What we saw was a glowing white Cylinder streaking towards the gateway ring.

‘Its one of the Previous Buddha ships. How is that possible, that means the Previous Buddhas are still in this area!’ Natasha said with her mouth hanging open in astonishment. Before any of us got a chance to chip in with our own ideas. Rom said.

‘Incoming vessel, no make that three incoming vessels.’

‘Three, are you sure they are not reflected images of the same craft?’

‘Negative, Ms Natasha, three distinct signals.’

‘Flipping heck’ David said, ‘like buses none for millennia then four at once.’

‘Four Cylinder craft’ I shook my head in astonishment.

‘Negative, Dr Chandra, these three ships are broadcasting subspace identity codes, not Cylinder ships. They are identifying themselves as: “Wu-Tai Pagoda”, “Sechen Gompa” and “Mahavihar”.

Emily squeaked out ‘Flying monasteries? What in heavens name next?’

What indeed. The lead ship was now closing fast on the artefact and in response a light was glowing in the ring.

‘Warning raising deflector shields on Garuda,’ Rom’s voice kicked into a tone which indicated an automated response to a perceived threat to the ships safety.

‘Energy levels from the artefact rising exponentially, unknown energy signature, danger.’

Dangerous it looked to, the ring had taken on the appearance of a brilliant glowing green eye in space. It suddenly seemed to spark and flash as the Cylinder ship disappeared into the centre of the eye, followed moments later, one after the other by the remaining three ships.

‘Standing down deflectors, energy signature returning to normal levels from artefact.’

‘Rom’ I asked quietly where are the other vessels I can’t see them on the monitors any more, they should be beyond the artefact by now.’

‘Negative, no other vessels in sensor range.’

Emily asked Rom to confirm that.

‘No other vessels in the system, that means they must have been destroyed.’

‘Affirmative, no other vessels in system’ Rom said then suddenly said.

‘Dr Chandra, another vessel has entered the system, it has reinserted into hyperspace, twenty five miles from here.’

‘Bugger’ I looked at the view screen. ‘What the hell is going on?’

The view screen sensors swung round and slowly down and the image of a vast great seemed to rise up like the morning sun on the monitor. It slender, sleek, shiny black and had a cheque pattern down the side and a line of red lights along the top.

Impossibly to me it seemed it also had written on it clearly in Hindi script the word “Bijlirani”.

‘Dr Chandra we are being hailed by the Hindustan Police Force, they want to know who we are and what we are doing here. Onscreen?’

I looked at David and Natasha and threw up my arms into the air. ‘Send them our ID codes Rom and download all of our mission data to them immediately. Hopefully that should keep them busy for a while.’

‘Negative Dr Chandra they demand immediate person to person communication. Shall I put them onscreen?’

‘Why not I suppose’ I shrugged my shoulders and said.

The view screen changed from a view of the Bijlirani to a view of a tall graceful Indian woman dressed in a sari and seated at the helm of a ship bridge.

‘District Magistrate Deepa Bharati speaking. Is it right your name is Dr Chandra Gupta of the Jefferson Institute?’ She fixed her dark eyes on me and smiled.

‘That is right.’ I replied staring at her intently, thinking, what was going on why had a Hindustani District Magistrate turned up here? My moment for thinking was cut short by her next words.

‘Mr Gupta, we would like you to assist the police in their enquiries into the theft of an Alien Space Craft.’

‘What!’ I spluttered in confusion, ‘are you accusing us of stealing an Alien Space Craft?’

Deepa giggled and a grin broke across her face and she dipped her head for a moment and looked bashful. ‘No, no, no, Dr Gupta, it has been stolen by the Peoples Liberation Army of Shaolin, what I want to know is have you seen it or three other craft which are chasing it.’

Natasha burst in: ““Wu-Tai Pagoda”, “Sechen Gompa” and “Mahavihar”?”

Deepa’s eyes opened wide for an instant, ‘Yes those vessels, where are they now?’

I shook my head and frowned, ‘They just appeared here moments before you did, but we would like to know as much as you now where they have gone.’

Natasha added, ‘They have either gone through a gateway in that artefact, or the artefact has completely vaporised them, isn’t that right Rom?’

‘Negative Ms Natasha, the ships are no longer existent in this space. However further data is now available after processing.’

Over the link Deepa's voice slipped from playful into an authoritative tone.

'Android Rom, state the nature of the data you are referring to.'

'Madam Magistrate, instants before the Cylinder ship entered the gateway I received a message which I have been unscrambling, audio only. The message is now available for playback.'

'Play it back Rom for us to all hear out loud.' I said pointing at the comm system. A faint crackle was followed by a voice I would get to know well in the coming times: General Chang. The message was short clear in tone and enigmatic in meaning.

'So long suckers, see you in Sukhavati.'

Chapter 3 Right Speech

Forest glade: no time

‘Mmm, I want some of those! They smell so good, have you made enough candies for me to have some as well?’

At the sound of Gopika’s request Radhika looked up from her stove for a moment as she adjusted a stick of firewood under the pan.

‘Silly, of course there will be enough, I am making extra anyhow, there will be enough Laddus for all the visitors, however many come.’ She stirred the mixture in the pan with a long bronze ladle and checked that none of the mixture of chickpea flour, clarified butter and jasmine honey was sticking to the black and time stained iron surface.

‘Did you hear what Ritu is making? Preeti say she is making a special brew of her blossom wine. Is it true Gopika?’

Gopika giggled and swung her hips from side to side so that the bells on her waist belt tinkled.

‘Blossom wine? Is that what you heard?’ She pressed two fingers to the side of her cheek as she dipped her head and her long braids fell forward for a moment, like black creepers against the brilliant green of her dress.

‘Menaka says you are too fond of blossom wine Radhika, she told me at the well this morning when I went fetch water, she thinks you are drunk on a wine you are hiding from us.’

Radhika dropped her eyes and stared at the floor and whispered, ‘My heart is under lock and key,’ then she looked up at the thatch of the roof and laughed, ‘Only the visitors can unlock my heart and set it free and let me drink the wine of my passions.’ She grinned and her voice sounded like water in a babbling brook, ‘The only wine I get drunk on is my true love’s devotion to me.’

Gopika stamped her foot so her ankle bells jingled and pouted, ‘I knew Menaka was ribbing me, I tell you all this talk of visitors has set the forest aflame with rumours of who they are.’

She paused and got to the real point of her whole speech.

‘Have you heard about what happened at the Night Jasmine Shrine last night?’

‘The mechanical bird that Ritu saw?’

Gopika’s eyes lit up. Her black mascara outlined the white of her eyes, like a golden sun on an autumn dawn seen in a clear sky through a palm fringed gap in the forest canopy.

So it was true. The first visitor had been a machine. A toy?

‘A bird you say? Where is it now? Flown away I suppose?’ She said sarcastically.

‘No, no my darling, it is still by the Night Jasmine Shrine where it fell when Ritu touched it. There was no real life in it and the magic in it failed when she touched it.

‘Not real magic? Is that what you are saying?’ Gopika frowned. Nobody liked sham magic or sham magicians, this didn’t sound hopeful.

‘You are a cynic Gopika I think sometimes, I just don’t know, you know as much as I know now.’ Radhika sighed as she stirred the pot. ‘Why don’t you go and see for yourself what kind of magic was in it and then come back and tell me. To be honest I think Ritu was so disappointed with the mechanical bird she just left it where it fell and ran to Champa and broke into tears.’

‘Hum, yes its not fair is it? We have no visitors for ages and then when we can hear them whispering outside all they do is send a mechanical bird to meet us.’

Gopika swung round and picked up her earthenware water pitcher from the floor and set it on her hips and said.

‘I’ll not forget the offer of candies to give to the visitors’ she chuckled, ‘don’t worry either I’ll bring you some of my curd for you to present to them, its so sweet in this season, they can’t fail to fall in love with you if you give it to them.’

Radhika grinned, her teeth a strange pearl white tint with a hint of red at the edges from chewing the nut of the Areca palm tree nut, paan. ‘Be off with you then, satisfy your curiosity for yourself, don’t drain the last gossip from everybody else, make some for yourself to give away to us all.’

Gopika strolled out of the village leaving the huts and drifting plumes of smoke from dozens of stoves cooking up treats in expectations of events soon to come in the forest. Champa was

gathering jasmine blossoms in the forest when Gopika saw her, for a moment Gopika contemplated asking her what she knew, but then decided against it. She would go and look at the mechanical bird for herself.

The Night Jasmine Shrine was just at the village limit. An ancient fig tree that grew in a vast canopy with thousands of trailing aerial roots that made it more like a thicket than a single tree. Under it a pile of stones marked the site where offerings were made to the spirit that dwelt in it. Champa said that in ancient times all manner of spirits were said to come from it, but now it was just a peaceful place and its deity was sleeping.

Gopika spotted the mechanical bird lying in a pile of underbrush. She went up close and stared at it. ‘Odd looking thing, wake up! Wake up!’ She shook it a little and called hoping it might wake up, but it didn’t. But even so as she looked at it and stared deeply into its depths she smiled.

‘Well, what do you know?’

‘Guess who?’

Champa said who had crept up on Gopika and was standing behind her holding her hands in front of Gopika’s eyes.

‘Champa! Or course its you, don’t be silly darling, bet you don’t know what I know!’ Gopika said breaking free of Champa’s touch and dancing around the fallen bird.

‘That the bird has no magic in it?’ Champa said.

Gopika stopped and stared back at Champa across the glade standing against the backdrop of the great tree and with the mechanical bird at her feet.

‘Yes, no magic, but I saw the sons and daughters of good families who made it.’ She gazed up at the crescent moon that was just rising in the Eastern sky.

‘Oh really?’ Grinned Champa, ‘Who did you see, the moon?’

‘Champa! So you looked to!’ Gopika screwed up her nose and whispered.

‘I accessed the data banks in the Mechanical Bird, so cute its electromagnetic storage systems, I have not see any like that for thousands of years. I can’t remember the last time I played with a remote sensing Probe. Chandra and David, Natasha and Emily, what fun we are going to have. She pointed her finger at the Probe and energy swept from

her into its circuitry and it activated, after a fashion, and she made it fly in patterns like a butterfly round her head as she danced back along the track to the village. As she danced she sang.

‘Champa, Radhika, Ritu, Gopika, Yakshi spirits of forest and glade are we.’

‘Chandra, David, Natasha, Emily, we’re going to have some fun you’ll see.’

Outside the Portal: 25/12/2645 20:18

‘We have no choice but to follow them into the portal.’ Deepa said as she stared into the centre of the ring. ‘Thank you Dr Chandra for agreeing to come with us, its good to have your company on this journey.’

‘Its a pleasure Madam Magistrate’, Chandra said, ‘to be honest I don’t think any of us could have turned back now. What’s more I don’t think the Garuda could keep up with the rest of the ships so we had no choice, either we came with you or we got left behind.’

Deepa smiled at him, ‘Let’s drop the formalities, call me Deepa, can I call you Chandra?’

‘Chandra, Deepa, that’s fine with me,’ Chandra said and stared at the main view screen. ‘What’s beyond the portal? What do you think Emily?’

Emily looked up from her pad where she had been making notes.

‘My best guess is we will come out straight away somewhere else than here, what I wonder is where?’

Chopra chuckled, ‘What bothers me is who will be there to meet us?’

‘Let’s find out folks,’ Deepa said and motioned to Chopra.

‘Full speed ahead Chopra, everybody else went in at speed and the portal activated for them, let’s hope it does for us as well.’

Chopra engaged the drive and the Bijlirani headed in towards the portal from its position hanging in space a million miles out from the ring. To begin with they could see the stars in the ring that lay beyond it in this space time frame. Then as Bijlirani picked up speed and headed in the ring started to glow with a green and gold light which grew brighter the nearer they came.

‘Hold on folks, may be a rough ride into the portal.’ Chopra said and gritted his teeth.

Uravashi counted them down to entry, ‘five, four, three, two, one, zero.’

As she said zero they hit the plane of the portal lens and the stars disappeared.

‘We are in another Cylinder!’ Chandra cried out.

‘Affirmative Dr Chandra, diameter 108 kilometres, length... incalculable.’

Rom stated in what seemed a most un-android like lack of accuracy.

Chandra stared in amazement at the scene before his eyes. They were in a tunnel that stretched off into the distance to where it disappeared at the vanishing point. The walls were covered in complex pattern of maze like forms that repeated over and over again, like a tessellated pattern of circuit boards or fretted windows from a palace like the Taj Mahal. Multicoloured lights seem to be dancing in patterns round the cylinder and pulsating as if to an unheard melody which they danced to the tune of.

All at once Chandra realised he was looking at his own body staring at the scene. The look of astonishment on his own face could not match the surprise he felt to be looking at his own face. Nor yet did he feel any decrease in panic as his viewpoint began to shift again and he was looking at Bijlirani from outside the hull as it flew down the centre of the tunnel.

The grating patterns on the tunnel wall seemed to loom large in front of him and in a moment he felt his consciousness passing through the matrix and he lost consciousness.

Forest glade: no time

‘Wake up sleepy head!’

Chandra felt somebody poking at his shoulder, he opened his eyes and saw a delicate finger with a ruby red nail on a golden hand. On the hand were intricate designs like a fine mesh. It reminded him of images he had seen of henna decorations on women’s hands for weddings in his family album from life in India long ago. He looked up.

‘Ah you are awake now Chandra, Welcome to the forest.’

‘Impossible’ he thought as he looked at a fairy like woman dressed in green and gold who stood with her head slightly bowed and

downcast eyes who was greeting him with folded palms held at chest level.

‘Err, “Namaste” to you too, where... where am I? Who are you?’

The vision of beauty giggled, ‘Silly boy, I have told you already, have you forgotten so soon? We are in the forest of course, where else would we be? As for me, my name is Gopika.’ She paused and gestured with her open palm turned upwards all around her. ‘These are my sisters: ‘Champa, Radhika, Ritu, Menaka, we all welcome you to the forest.’

Chandra was so dumbfounded he forgot his question about how they knew his name, for the moment.

The girl she had pointed to last, Menaka, skipped up in the air and clapped her hands, ‘Welcome all of you and you have brought friends as well, how nice to have so many visitors all at once.’

Chandra stared around him, half sitting, half lying in a circle round him were Deepa, Chopra, David and Emily. All apparently drifting into consciousness, Chopra was smiling at one of the girls, Ritu, with a blissful expression, like a child when it sees a sweet it really wants within reach.

Gopika grabbed Chandra by the arm and pulled him up so he was standing.

‘Chandra, who are your friends? We recognise David and Emily, please, please introduce us to the lovely lady and the cute man with moustaches.’ She giggled, ‘Are they your king and queen? The lady looks so regal.’

‘Gopika!’ Champa waved her hand back and forth at Gopika and said. ‘Let the poor darling catch his breath, before he introduces us to his friends.’

Deepa stood up without any help and said in a strong voice.

‘My name is District Magistrate Deepa Bharati, and this is...’ she turned to indicate Chopra, and glared at him as he was making eyes at Ritu, and continued. ‘Inspector Yash Chopra of the Hindustan Police.’

Menaka looked puzzled and asked ‘What kind of a name is that? “Dee Strictum Jeeta Rayt”? I think we shall call you Deepa, its such a lovely name.’ Then she turned to Chopra and said ‘Ian Spectra Ash? Don’t you think that Chopra is more of a proper name to have?’

Gopika laughed, ‘Deepa and Chopra then are to be your names, we know nothing of this place called “Indus Stamp Lease” you will have to tell us more about what it is later.

All of the girls giggled together and Ritu whispered something to Radhika who looked Chopra up and down and grinned wiggling her forefinger up and down. Champa, shouted out.

‘Choop!’ And in a moment they all quietened down.

‘Pardon us sons and daughters of good families it is long since we have had visitors to this glade, forgive us our lack of manners. We bombard you with questions before you have even had your feet washed or taken refreshment. Come let us leave this glade and go to the village.’

Deepa broke in, ‘Stop! We are going nowhere until you tell us where our companions are. Where is Natasha? Uravashi? Deepak? In fact where is all of my crew?’

Champa shook her head, ‘Natasha was with your friends, why she is not with them now we do not know, the same goes for your friends, your “crew” as you call them. The forest is vast and stretches infinite in every direction, some visitors come here, some go there, some say it is by chance, some say that something attracts people to different glades.’ She paused and added in a concerned voice, ‘Maybe during your stay we will hear from other glades in the forest that your friends are there.’

‘What of our ship?’ Chandra asked.

‘Ship? In the forest? Now you joke with us guests, you can’t get ships into forests now can you? Champa smiled, ‘Your ship must still be in the river where you left it I imagine.’

‘Hum,’ Chandra said feeling that Champa knew more than she was saying.

‘Rejoice, sons and daughters of good families, you are welcome here during your stay in the forest.’ Gopika said, puzzled at what was eating these people, didn’t they know about the forest? Didn’t they know they were lucky to find themselves here?

Deepa barked out ‘Chopra, Chandra, what do you reckon shall we accompany them?’

Menaka nudged Champa and whispered, ‘So she is the queen and they are the ministers, what do you think?’

Chopra shrugged, ‘sounds fine to me, no point in staying here, Ritu says they have tea and treats for us in the village, I can’t see anything wrong with the sound of that.’

Chandra nodded his head in assent, ‘Perhaps we can gather data in the village that will help us to understand the situation.’

‘Dates!’ Ritu squealed, ‘They want dates they say, I have some, how lucky I can give them to the visitors.’

She turned and looked at Chopra, ‘So do you want a date?’

Chopra looked bashful and embarrassed, ‘No, no, it is data, information, that we want, although come to think of it, if you have any dates that would be nice too.’

Ritu scolded Chopra, ‘silly of course we have dates, we have all the fruits of the forest, silly come along now.’ Saying which she started to pretend to tug on his arm and he with a silly grin on his face pretended to be pulled along.

Chandra shook his head as he walked along next to Gopika who accompanied him along the woodland path as they left the glade with its great fig tree behind and headed towards the village.

‘Have you brought any more mechanical birds with you?’ Gopika said.

Chandra’s eyes opened in surprise.

‘Mechanical birds? What do you mean?’

‘Like the one you sent earlier as a gift to us, that’s what I mean silly.’

Gopika pouted, ‘But its broken now it doesn’t fly properly any longer, see.’

She pointed over to where the probe lay tangled in some twigs in a tree.

‘Its sitting in the tree now and won’t come down however much you call.’

‘Deepa look! It’s the probe we sent from the Garuda.’

Deepa glanced up and saw the probe. ‘Ah ha, so physical objects can get into this place.’

‘Physical objects?’ Champa said, ‘What a funny thing to say and grabbed Deepa’s hand in hers. ‘Do we not feel physical to you, do you think this is but a dream? Take care Deepa, you must learn to distinguish true reality from phantasms in this forest or you will live to regret your mistaken perceptions.’

She paused, 'Enough of this foolish talk. See the village green is just around this bend beyond the Toddy palm trees.'

They entered a broad clearing in the forest where mud and thatch huts were situated in a circle round a green sward of grass. At its centre a pavilion of multi-coloured tapestry cloth was stretched over a circle of cushions and rugs.

'Come, we have set out a place for you to sit and enjoy the day with us, take the weight off your feet and relax, you must be tired after your long journey.'

'How do you know we have had a long journey? Chandra asked.

'Silly boy, Deepa spoke of a ship, you your self spoke of a journey did you not? What's more you are obviously not from round these parts or you would know that this is only a way station on the journey that leads from the depths of night to the great city.'

Everybody's ears pricked up at this.

'Tell us more Champa of what you know.'

'No, there will be time for stories later, we want to know all about you as well Chandra, later, later as the evening falls we will sing the songs of the great way. This is the time to relax and take refreshment.' She smiled and stared into Chandra's eyes.

'Pretty boy, do not waste the morning of your life in old men's worries, enjoy this picnic in the noontday sun in the forest of life while you can.' She clapped her hands and other women appeared from the huts around the clearing. They were all dressed in blouses and full skirts in shades of green, yellow and gold and heavy sparkling gold necklaces, belts, bangles and baubles decorated their every limb. In their hands they brought earthenware pitchers of water and bronze and silver platters of every imaginable delicacy the girls could think of. In the corner of the tent three women sat down and began to play strange haunting melodies on harps and flutes which filled the air with liquid sounds like honey.

Deepa sat back on a deep velvet cushioned seat and watched with amazement as one girl put a broad bowl under her feet and another poured water from a pitcher over her feet and started to rub them with leaves that produced a lather as she did so.

'Stop, stop, please, I can wash my own feet' and she leant forwards to help clean her feet.

‘No, no, daughter of a good family’ The girls cried in unison, ‘You honour us by letting us serve you in this way, do not dishonour us.’

Deepa’s protests were in vain, and as the girls washed her feet she felt the cares of the journey lift from her spirit, washed away by the cool clear waters gathered from the forest springs. Likewise none of her companions could hold back the women from washing their feet. Chopra tried his best to stop them, and held the girls hands in his own trying to hold them off, but they would not take no for an answer and he found his hands touching their hands as together their wet and soapy palms lathered his feet.

‘Chopra seems to be enjoying himself a bit too much’ Deepa thought glancing over at him. It was as if he was being caught up in a spell cast by the magic of the women’s presence and the wonders of the forest glade. Chandra too was sitting by her side with a rapt expression on his face gazing into the distance as if transfixed.

‘Chandra, what do you make of all this? Is this a dream or reality? Can you figure out what is going on?’

Chandra started from his reverie and looked at Deepa and grinned.

‘Don’t worry Deepa. These are forest fairies Deepa, Yakshis, in the old Pali language of my forefathers, your forefathers too. Don’t you remember stories of them from when you were a child at your mother’s feet?’

‘Vaguely, we were raised more on stories of India’s greatness as a world power in the 21st century and of the great free trade zone that stretched from Bonn to Bali. Those are the tales I remember most, Birlas, Tatas, Jaitlees and Bajpais: the captains of industry that led the motherland out of destitution and into the golden age of prosperity.’

‘I was told those myths as well. But, they never seemed as real to me as the Jataka tales my mother told me. The countless lives of the Boddhisattva as he practised the perfections through numberless births before he become the Buddha in his final life.’

‘Wah! Wah! Well said, truly you are a son of a good family!’

Champa broke in, ‘Countless tales you say? Wonderful, we would hear every tale from your own sweet lips before we let you leave this place. You have wetted my appetite to know you in every way a Yakshi can know a man.’

Deepa raised her eyebrows at this, Champa laughed seeing this ‘Deepa dear, worry not, he is your prince I see, we will not take him

from you.’ She stopped and laid her palm affectionately on Deepa’s thigh, ‘We would like to know you too and explore every pore of your body through and through.’

‘Not if I can help it,’ Deepa thought to herself, and pulled away from Champa’s hand which was beginning to softly massage the flesh of her thigh through the thin silk fabric of her crimson brocade sari. ‘Her sari?’ She looked down again in dismay. It was just like the sari her mother had brought for her from the market at Bhagalavati when she was but a young teenager and had dreamed of marriage as the highest blessing a girl could hope for. That dream had not lasted long as she had turned away from that path to enter the way of the guardians of the law inspired by her uncle Bhimsen who had risen to the rank of Deputy Commissioner and whose splendid uniform and medals began to fascinate her more than saris and makeup ever had.

‘Chandra, what was I wearing on the bridge of the Bijlirani?’

Chandra looked puzzled for a moment then said, ‘Your khaki space suit uniform, helmet with integrated head up display, bush shirt, trousers and boots.’

‘How am I dressed now?’

Chandra stared at her for a moment.

‘Your hair is in a single braid with white jasmine flowers woven in to it. You are dressed in a crimson and gold sari, a short sleeved silk scarlet bodice, golden bracelets on your wrists and silver bells and bangles on your feet.’ He looked closely at her feet. ‘Which I see the women have painted with some sort of red dye on their soles.’

‘Humph, and how do you think you are dressed?’

‘Deepa!’ Chandra stared at his own form. On his top he was dressed in a long wheaten coloured homespun silken shirt with a round cut collar and five buttons in front, his legs were clad in a fine white garment wrapped in a complex manner so as to form a cross between a skirt and a pair of trousers. His feet were bare and he wore only a single piece of jewellery. The amulet he always wore which had been handed down in his family for generations and was said to contain some sacred formula from the Buddhist tradition.

‘But, but, I am wearing a kurta and a dhoti like my grandfather used to wear when I was a child at ceremonial occasions.’ He shook his head.

‘But, Deepa I saw myself on the bridge the moment that my consciousness left my body. I was sitting there in a blue flight suit with my helmet visor open staring at the view screen.’

‘What did you say, you saw your own body in the ship?’

Deepa stood up and called out, ‘Guys, all of you get over here, now, we need to debrief on what each of us has observed.’

Menaka grinned, ‘Goodie! Are you going to perform a play? Yes, that must be what the “Deep Reef” is.’ she looked around and gestured to the women in the pavilion, ‘All of you come on over here, the visitors are going to perform a play for us called “The Deep Reef”!’

Somehow the crowd of chattering women would not accept that a debriefing was not some form of a play. Chandra tried to explain.

‘No, no, we are each going to tell what we saw when we came from our ship to here and what we think happened, then we will compare our stories and try and work out what really happened.’

‘So?’ Said Champa shaking her head. ‘Isn’t that a kind of a play, you all tell stories and then one of you explains what really happened at the end.’ She clapped her hands together and her bracelet bells jangled as if calling everybody to attention.

‘A play it is then, even though the name “The Deep Reef” makes no sense to us now I am sure it will when you have told your tales.’

So it was that the women listened in rapt attention as each of the travellers told their tales. Each story turned out to be different.

Chandra told his tale first, and all the women sighed as he spoke of seeing his body on the bridge as if contemplating for themselves his manly form. Then it was Deepa’s turn.

‘As the ship entered the portal I saw a glowing tunnel of light that seemed to sparkle as if with a million silver sequins sewn on to a cloth of gold. Then rose coloured petals seemed to come floating out of the air and settle on everything on the bridge. It became as if I was looking through a golden tasselled veil of red muslin at the scene around me. Then a radiance seemed to glow bright in front of me and it was as if the veil was being lifted from eyes and I fell into unconsciousness. Then I awoke in the glade.’

‘Wonderful, what imagery, the bride of the bridge has told her tale,’ Champa said, ‘now you next Chopra.’

Deepa scowled a little, not used to having the chairmanship of the meeting so roughly taken from her hands.

‘I was on the bridge, the helm controls were in my hands and I looked down at them. Something was wrong I could see, the buttons started to glitter and sparkle and I couldn’t focus on them. Then I saw my own fingers were glistening with golden light and as I looked I saw the skin, sinews, veins and bones as if they were under a strange scanner in which each part, within and without my body, was illuminated. Then I seemed to find myself zooming in closer and closer to the glittering diamond like particles that my body was made of. The last thing I remember before waking up was a sense of oneness in which there was no longer any separation between the seer and the seen, the observer and the observed.’

A ripple of clapping hands rang round the women.

‘Well said! Well said! Well said! Chopra is a sage who sees into the heart of reality and knows things as they really are.’

Champa smiled, ‘Thrice blessed are we all by your company guests, what wonders you tell of.’ She turned and looked at David and Emily who had remained silent since arriving in the forest. ‘Tell your tales now son and daughter of good families.’

‘I can’t begin to explain what happened,’ David began and faltered, looking around, ‘It sounds ridiculous what I saw.’ Deepa broke in this time.

‘David, you are always the most observant of your crew I understand we need to know what you saw.’

‘I am ashamed to say that I glimpsed nothing of the technology that Chandra saw nor the lights and jewels that you and Chopra saw.’

He paused.

‘Rather my tale is of slipping into what can only be a fantasy as far as I can see.’

He looked shamefacedly down at the ground and hid his eyes from the assembled company and continued.

‘As we entered the portal the light seemed to wash over me and I found myself in my kitchen at home with Emily. We were sitting at the breakfast table and eating toast. I asked Emily to pass the butter and she started to say “sure”, when I noticed that her open mouth was somehow darker inside than I expected. I stared into her mouth and saw that within instead of a tongue, teeth and gums was the dark arch

of the heavens under which the lamps of the moon and sun and the planets hung. Countless stars were glittering in the night sky and the numberless stars of the milky way filled my heart with a sense of awe and wonder. I was just wondering how this could all be seen in the body of my partner when I realised I was falling into the darkness of the infinite space I was looking at.' He glance up at Emily, 'Emily, how can that have been, it was just some strange fantasy wasn't it?'

This account was greeted with such rapturous gleeful applause that Emily's answer was lost in the hubbub.

'Beautiful, guests, your tales tell us of the lover and the beloved in such sweet ways we are swooning.' Champa said feigning a sigh and falling back onto the bed of soft silk pillows she was supporting herself on.

'Now Emily, tell your story.'

Emily spoke in slow measured tones.

'I fear what I will have to say lacks all of the poetry of my companions visions, in truth I am no seer of visions it seems at all. I saw nothing at all.'

'Nothing?' The audience said and descended into shocked silence.

'Nothing, I saw nothing, I was on the bridge checking the sensor read outs as we approached the portal. And had just noted a sudden rise in positive charged neutrinos when we intersected with the portal field, or whatever it was. I was contemplating the equations which might account for the neutrino emissions at the moment of first contact. I saw nothing... but I sensed how by manipulating the data though a multi-dimensional matrix I could understand the readings. For an instant I began to see how it might be possible to transform the data sets into N dimensional sets of Fourier transformations which would allow me to directly measure the probability of matter becoming energy and vice versa. That is, all that happened before I woke suddenly in the glade.' She hung her head, 'Now the sad thing is I cannot quite remember how the equations were structured.'

Menaka rushed over and embraced Emily, 'Bravo! More lovely than glittering lights, mere gems and precious stones are the insights of one who sees the way things really are in its true manner stripped of both matter and energy.' She paused and asked, 'Did you consider applying a Fourier transformation to the way the wave in curved space time was being reflected around a matrix of N to the power of N

dimensions? Do try it please! Can we compare our speculations later? I love pure mathematics more than anything in the cosmos.'

The travellers were stunned by this and the silence was broken by Gopika.

'So who will tell the tale the way it really was?'

'Deepa? Chandra? Chopra? David? Emily? No you have all had your say, I say it is Champa's turn to tell the tale. She is the oldest of us and her memories reach back to the dawn I have heard say. Champa, tell the tale as you see it.'

Deepa glanced over at Chandra, 'How can she tell our tale? She was not there. She knows nothing it seems of the world beyond the portal.'

Champa coughed, 'Deepa, do not take us for fools, I may look a young woman in the prime of life, but I am older than I seem, so don't, as they say "teach your grandmother to suck eggs". No, I will tell your tale as I know it, limited in other ways than your own, by the very limits of conventional language and symbol to point to the truth which lies at the heart of all things.'

All of the travellers and the audience waited expectantly for Champa's account.

'In the after years of this age it is hard to know the way things really are in themselves. Many are the views that we have on what we experience, in pursuit of these phantasms the cosmos is filled with countless Buddha fields. In some True Buddhas teach, in some false Buddhas, and in some the True Teaching is not even remembered or has not yet been revealed. You come from the Buddha field of Shakyamuni Buddha, but you have lost the way and do not understand the nature of the path at all. It has been ossified and distorted and you have not made the experience your own. Somehow it seems you have come across, by accident I expect, traces of the Previous Buddhas of your Buddha field. So I have understood now that you do not have any idea what you have got yourself into to. Let me tell you what you can understand.' She paused and drew a ring with six junctions in it in the platter of rice grains in front of her.

'You saw a ring in space that your ships approached. You landed and investigated. We heard your thoughts as you explored and wondered why anybody would be so foolish as to seek to understand the works of the First Buddhas. So we waited to see what would

happen perhaps you were not really sentient at all but phantasms of false magic sent by some Pacceka Buddha to worry us.'

She stopped for a moment and shook the platter so that the circle disappeared.

'The ring is not real, it is the projection into your space of a path that leads to the great city. You flew your ships in expecting physical matter to be all that you needed to transfer from one space to another. Even now your ships are flying along the matrix path and will in time emerge on the shores of the great sea where the city lies. Consciousness though can not travel in the same way, you must follow the path through the forest to get to the portal to the city. You must free your minds from the conditioning which binds them. You must practice one of the six perfections to pass through the way: giving, morality, forbearance, vigour, contemplation or insight. These are the roads you must travel to pass through the portal.'

'Why?' Said Chopra, 'surely our ships will pass through any way?'

Champa shook her head. 'Chopra, your ships will pass through, but they will be but barges bearing empty space if you do not follow the way through the forest and return your consciousnesses to the ships before they leave the portal.'

'How long do we have?' Deepa asked.

'As long as it takes, it may seem like eternity, but if you succeed you will rejoin your ship after you realise a perfection. Ask then your companion Rom, who cannot enter here, of the time. In the end you will pass through.'

'And if we fail to realise even one of the Perfections?' Chandra asked.

'Then you will live for eternity on the way, like us who are citizens of the way.'

David suddenly said, 'I want to go back, can't we go back out the way the probe came into the ring structure.'

'Emily, will you come back with me?'

Emily sighed, 'David, I can see the possibility, but I don't think I could live with myself if we turned back now, I have to go on, even if it is possible to go back.'

Champa touched David lightly on the shoulder and said softly, 'David, how can you go back? Is there a shuttle waiting to take you to your craft?'

David thought for a moment.

‘One could be summoned on my suit comm link, but, I do not have a space suit. Can’t you help?’

Champa sighed, ‘We ourselves cannot leave the way, it is said that once you enter the way you cannot turn back again, I am sorry David you cannot turn back.’

David looked caught in a quandary for a moment then he said, ‘Its not really the technology anyway. I cannot go back unless Emily comes with me so I have to give up the idea any how.’

‘David,’ Emily smiled at him, ‘Together we will find a way I am sure.’

Champa swung round from watching David and Emily and fixed her gaze on Deepa, Chandra and Chopra.

‘What of you three? Are you resolved to follow the way come what may?’

Chandra in a cold voice replied, ‘Champa, I have been set on this way since first I set eyes on the Previous Buddha’s images.’

‘Good,’ Champa nodded solemnly, ‘and you Deepa?’

Deepa sighed, ‘I also have no choice, I am dedicated to tracking down the criminal who I pursued into this portal, I have sworn to follow him to the gates of hell if necessary, I must follow the way, my duty is the way.’

‘Well said,’ said Deepa, ‘I acknowledge your sincerity.’

Champa turned and grinned at Chopra.

‘I think I know what you will say, but tell me anyway, son of the wind.’

‘I must follow Deepa, she is the light that leads my way, where she goes there I will follow. You may call me a sentimental fool of a Police Inspector, though perhaps you may not choose those words, but I am the loyal servant of my leader. I am bound by duty to follow her.’

Chopra paused and looked around him.

‘Besides, from what I see around me this is the chance of a lifetime.’

Gopika stood up and clapped her hands.

‘Enough, those words clearly must mark the end of “The Deep Reef”, although truly we still do not understand the allusion you are making in the title.’

‘It is a play with a lovely sentiment and we applaud it, five tales all told in different ways of how the way was found by travellers. An explanation and a resolution of dedication to following the Noble Path. A story to inspire all creatures.’

‘Now, let us celebrate this drama’s first act, I declare that it demonstrates the sentiment of “Whole Hearted Giving” in a most unexpected and delightful way. But now, it is the time for the feasting and dancing to begin.’

All thought of rational debate went out the window as the food and beverages began to flow. Fruits of the forest, sweets and candies, fried cakes and fritters of every shape and size. Sumptuous soft and hard curries and vegetable dishes. Rice boiling in pots heated by hot stones placed in the pot itself and hot and spicy condiments of mustard and cardamom, cinnamon and clove. Conical wickerwork baskets full of soft and tasty breads in an ever renewed cornucopia of delight so it seemed that nobody’s hunger could not be satisfied. Sweet curds and clarified butter flowed like water and the milk rice was sweeter than the sweetest smile on a child’s face. The drinks were so many that just a sip of each would have intoxicated almost anybody. Rice wine, Barley wine, Berry wine, Blossom wine; countless varieties of mead and ale beyond number in great pitchers that never seemed to empty however much was poured.

‘Deepa, I can’t understand it at all,’ eventually Chandra managed to say to Deepa when he pulled her aside for a moment on the pretence of making her try the fourteen types of curds that Gopika had offered him to try.

‘What in particular about every impossible thing about this bothers you?’ Deepa asked with a perplexed look, then added, ‘I can’t make head or tail of any of it and think I have probably had too much of that Blossom wine to be honest with you.’

‘Chandra do you remember when we first woke up they knew the names of the crew of the Garuda but not those of you, Deepa and Chopra?’

Deepa squinted and furrowed her brow as if struggling to recollect.

‘Why yes, so they did, how funny, do you think it is important?’

‘I don’t know but it bothers me.’

‘Then ask Gopika to explain, she seems sweet on you, and knowledgeable, maybe she can tell you.’

It was strangely easy for Chandra to pull Gopika to one side and she seemed delighted at his desire to be alone with her for a moment. They walked through the dancing circles of women who wound around the pavilion in a sinuous curve like a wave under the full moon that had risen in the evening sky above the clearing.

Gopika listened with rapt attention as Chandra said.

‘Gopika, you never told me how you knew our names, how did you know that I was Chandra?’

‘I saw it in the data-banks in your mechanical bird.’

‘How?’

‘Come I will show you.’

Gopika led Chandra to the soft shadows under the tree where the probe was tangled in the branches and lifted up her arm and a sparkling cascade of light leapt from her fingers and drifted up into the probe which sparked and rocked in the tree and then came loose and drifted down in front of the pair.

‘How on Earth did you do that?’ Chandra said in amazement.

‘We are not on Earth Chandra, everyday magic, such as we forest spirits possess, was more than sufficient for such a task.’

‘Okay, I don’t understand that, so show me how you saw the data, how did you do that?’

‘Chandra, sit here with me in this arbour of soft grasses under the tree and I will show you.’

Together they sank down into the soft grass and sat facing each other with the probe in between them.

‘Hold out your palms so they touch mine Chandra.’

Chandra held his arms outstretched so his palms and those of Gopika met.

‘Now watch, son a good family the small magic of the forest folk.’

Chandra found that his gaze was drawn to the probe and he was able, as if through Gopika’s eyes to see inside the outer casing. He could see the components inside each quite clearly and then he found he could see the data banks, solid state memory chips of binary data. Then he could see the data all around him like light and darkness in infinite patterns stretching all around him. Finally he saw in the patterns of noughts and ones the meanings that were encoded and saw in the data the records of the transmissions to the Garuda. They were labelled for the attention of Android Rom, Dr Chandra, Ms Natasha, Dr David and

Dr Emily. Plain as the nose on his face were the names in the subject line of the data transmissions.

Chandra shook his head in astonishment and the vision disappeared and he found himself staring into Gopika's eyes, like the eyes of a love sick maiden staring at the moon.

'Gopika that was beautiful, if only there was something I could give to you.'

Chandra thought to himself, everything I have is back on the ship, what use would she have for a kurta or a dhoti. After all she herself is clad in clothes and jewels that would make even the iridescent birds and butterflies of the forest envious of their beauty.

Then it came to him, the amulet with its scroll of the teachings of the Buddha. But he wondered could he give up something which had been treasured in his family for countless generations to a stranger, a non-human forest spirit, he had only just met in an impossible forest in a place beyond belief.

'What better time and place to give away my amulet could there be?' He realised. He drew his hands away from Gopika, she sighed and looked disappointed thinking no doubt that he was drawing back. Then as she saw him lift the amulet on its red thread from around his neck and proffer it to her, her face lit up like the face of a deer illuminated in the dawn light on the banks of the Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas.

'Chandra, you are giving this to me?'

'Gopika, I want you to have this, it has been in my family for so long I don't know how long, it contains a scroll of the teachings of the Buddha. Here let me put it on you.' He walked round and stood behind Gopika and gently lowered the thread of the amulet over her jet black tresses and onto her golden smooth neck.

'A gift from me to you, in return for the kindness you have shown Gopika.'

Gopika swooned in his arms and her body like a creeper seemed to cling to him. She whispered.

'You can have no idea what this means to me Chandra, no idea at all, thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

As she said this she turned around in his arms and clasped her arms around his torso and standing on tiptoes she kissed him on the lips.

'Gopika, don't,' Chandra said.

‘Hush my darling,’ Gopika said touching his lips with the soft tips of her fingers, ‘I have a gift for you too, let us become one.’

Chandra was intoxicated by her scent, her nearness, the feel of her body on his, and as he looked at her face he felt himself drawn into the depths of her eyes; like the moon’s image reflected in a limpid pool of forest water in the night. He gazed into her eyes and as he did so felt himself beginning to slip into her eyes and he realised that he was losing consciousness. The last thing he heard was.

‘Hush, darling moon, let us be one.’

David stared at the dancing girls, for a moment he saw each and every one as Emily. A circle of Emilies and it was if with each one a David was dancing. Each perfectly in harmony with each other. Each gazing in rapture at each other as they danced. No, it was a lie, he told himself, Emily wanted one thing, he wanted another. Disconsolate he slipped away from the dance and into the cool of the shadows of the forest. From afar Menaka spotted him and followed without him knowing.

After a while he came to the spot where the probe now lay on the ground. But now David saw it was different. Its lights were glowing like fireflies in the darkness.

‘Amazing’ he said to himself, ‘the batteries must have recharged somehow and it has re-activated, perhaps the back up systems have come on line.’

‘If only I knew where the access shaft was,’ he said out loud.

‘The probe can lead you to the access shaft.’ A voice came from the darkness behind him.

He turned around and saw the faint image of a woman standing in the shadows.

‘Whose there?’ He said softly.

In response Menaka stepped into the moonlight in the clearing. A sad wistfulness seemed to play over the features of her face. She whispered.

‘Poor David you are torn by your desires which to give away, your longing to go home or your love.’ She paused for a moment and then said.

‘Can you make the probe move?’

David wondered for a moment and then said, 'Probe, authority David alpha one, initiate movement, hover at three feet above present location.'

As if in response to his words the probe did as he said.

'Wonderful,' he said with a thrill in his voice, 'the voice activation codes are working again.'

In the darkness he couldn't see the smile on Menaka's face as she gently gestured with her fingers and made the probe rise as if to David's commands.

'A gift to David,' she said to herself.

'Can you make it retrace its path to the access shaft?'

'Its worth a try Menaka, Probe authority David alpha one, return to access shaft location.'

The probe seemed to turn for a moment and then head back along the path to the fig tree grove of the Night Jasmine shrine. David followed, his face lit up with joy, the faint hope of getting out of this nightmare for a moment drove all thoughts of Emily from his mind. He didn't notice the way that Menaka was keeping her fore finger pointed all the time at the probe.

But Emily watching from the shadows did. She could even see the tiny sparkling particles of magic scintillating in the dark that linked Menaka to the probe. But for her they were nothing in comparison to the light of joy on the face of her beloved as he followed the probe.

After a while the probe stopped at the foot of the great fig tree. It hovered just above the pile of offering stones in front of where the trunks divided and left a dark space. In the deep darkness you could not see anything.

'What's there David, behind he stones?' Menaka asked, knowing full well what was really there. David crept forward gingerly and climbed over the offering stones and into the gap in the trunks of the tree. He felt round with his hands, smooth circular walls met his touch and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness he suddenly said.

'Silly me, probe, authority David alpha one, move towards me and turn on navigation lights.' He couldn't see Menaka sigh as she moved the probe forwards, nor yet the effort it took her to make its navigation lights come on feebly.

'The light level is low Menaka,' David said, 'But even so I can see I am in the lift shaft, and the control panel is here in the wall.'

He stood in the threshold of the lift, the lights of the probe illuminating his face from below and giving a mournful look to his face.

‘Menaka, this is wonderful and dreadful, all at the same time. What am I to do, I could leave now and give up my love for Emily, or I can stay with Emily and give away my dream of escaping from this nightmare.’ It seemed to David an eternity that he stood there contemplating what to give up. He knew that this was a deciding moment in his life, what should he give away. Eventually he knew what he had to do and he took one step out of the lift shaft and quietly said.

‘I renounce my dream of returning home, I give it away in exchange for life with Emily.’

‘No David, don’t do that,’ Emily spoke from the shadows where she had been standing waiting to see what happened. ‘It’s wonderful that you would give away your dream of returning home to be with me. But you don’t need to. I give up my dream of following this way to return home with you.’

Menaka breathed a deep sigh of relief, ‘How marvellous each of you would give away your dreams to be with each other, truly the gifts that you have for each other are beyond compare.’

‘Step into the lift and you can return to the surface and summon your shuttle using the systems in the probe.’

‘Good bye Menaka, we will not forget your kindness to us, be safe and well, we give you all our love, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you be free from suffering.’

Menaka sighed and said, ‘Thank you, you don’t know what a gift you have given me, farewell, may you be happy.’

She was filled with joy at their words, for in return for their gift she could give her most precious gift of all to them, the gift of herself.

At Menaka’s words David and Emily stepped into the lift and David pressed the button to make the lift ascend. The doors closed and the lift went up.

They couldn’t see Menaka in the darkness, it was as if she had disappeared.

Moments later the lift reached the surface and they came out onto the plaza. Inside the containment field the field teams had erected around the lift shaft in anticipation of a long exploration of the ring

structure the air was clear and the stars were shining bright in the dome of the heavens above.

‘David, how could we have forgotten there is even a ground station here we set up before we abandoned the ring exploration program.

‘Emily, I can’t imagine how it slipped our minds, its as if we were under a spell.’

They sent a message to the Garuda to send over a shuttle to pick them up and sat on the step by the edge of the lift access building and leaned against each other as they looked up at the stars, each holding their arms around each other’s shoulders.

‘Its a long way home from here Emily, but think of it when we get back what stories we will have to tell.’

Emily smiled at the stars, ‘I think I could enjoy a long voyage home now David, it will give me time to work on those formulae I was thinking of in the forest, Menaka gave me some ideas to, I reckon this could be a fruitful journey in its own right.’

‘Me too,’ David said, ‘I want to work on a theory I have as well, maybe we got it the wrong way round on Tau Ceti III, maybe the Previous Buddha aliens didn’t come from there to here. Maybe its the other way round, they came from this portal to colonise this galaxy.’

They stared out in silence then for a while watching as the shuttle approached like a point of light glinting in the darkness.

They didn’t hear the sub-molecular conversation going on in their bodies between the sentient energy particles that now constituted the material form of their bodies.

‘What fun to be free to wander this Buddha field again Menaka!’

‘Shush, Ritu, remember, its called a galaxy in this age.’

Meanwhile back at the village Deepa was becoming more and more befuddled by the wines she had drunk.

‘Seen that Chandra, have you eh?’ She nudged Champa in the ribs with her elbow. Champa giggled.

‘He went off with Gopika a while ago, I expect he will be back in a while.’

‘Men!’ Deepa snorted, ‘can’t trust ‘em an inch I reckon, I thought he was a bit of all right, but...’ She remembered why she had given up dreams of marriage, boys, they were the problem, nasty things boys, always making fun of her because she was taller than the other girls,

which had made her ungainly for a while. Later she realised it made her a willowy kind of beauty. But, by then her dreams had changed.

‘No Deepa, think no ill of him, he is not unfaithful to you in thought.’

‘Come, lift your spirits let us join the dance under the moon light.’

Champa pulled Deepa to her feet and she joined her in the round dance in the glade. The trees seemed to be transformed by the moonlight into coral and amethyst blooms and blossoms in set in green jade filigrees.

As they danced their bodies touched and Deepa felt as if particles of fire were heating her every limb. The contrast of the cool moon and the fire in her blood was too much for her.

‘Champa lets stop dancing for a while, I feel faint.’

‘Deepa, what a lovely idea, come let us rest here by the side of this pool in the cool of the forest autumn night.’

They sat together staring into the still forest pool reflecting the pale moon in its depths. It seemed to Deepa as if they were merging into the silence of the night. The sound of the distant tinkling of bells from the dancing girls and the strains of almost imperceptible heavenly music only made the silence seem somehow deeper. The combination of the grassy bank and the slightest trace of the rush she had felt before from the Blossom wine made everything feel soft and caressing to her senses.

‘Champa, this day has been a dream of something unlike I have ever experienced before. You and your friend have been so generous to us all I feel so happy. I only wish I had something I could give to you in return.’

Deepa looked down at herself, what use would Champa have for her sari, she seemed to have countless saris of her own, what use would Champa have for her jewellery, it was pale in comparison to the lustre of Champa’s jewellery. There was nothing on her body that she could give to Champa it seemed. Then she smiled to herself and looked at Champa coyly.

‘Champa I have no silk, nor gold and jewellery worthy to give to you. And what can I give from this forest to you? Everything in this forest already belongs to you. But, still perhaps I have something which I can give to you. I have always guarded it as a treasure and the thought of giving it to a woman never crossed my mind till today.

But, I want to give you something and it is all that I have to give to you.'

Champa's eyes glittered in the dark and she waited with baited breath for what she hoped above all hopes might happen next.

Deepa stood up and removed her bodice and then freeing her waist belt unwound her sari so that it slipped from her body into a heap at her feet. Moonlight shone on her limbs and glistened on her hair as she let it down. She whispered.

'I have nothing else to give you Champa than my body, Champa please take me as my offering to you.'

A breeze rustled the trees at that moment and a rain of white jasmine petals fell from the tree as she spoke and decorated her form in a soft white rain of fragrance.

'Deepa, the gift of your own body is beyond compare, you cannot imagine the happiness this brings to me. I accept your gift. Come let us be one.'

Champa reached out her hand and pulled Deepa down onto her and embraced her. Deepa felt Champa's breath on her face and Champa's arms close around her. Then she raised her eyebrows and the thrill of a climax utterly unlike the one she had expected ran through her every pore. For she felt Champa's arms, not hold her, but enter into her flesh and mingle with her flesh. She stared wide eyed with astonishment and joy at Champa's grin as began to feel herself falling into her eyes. The last thing she knew before she lost consciousness was a sense of their bodies merging and each and every atom being joined in blissful union.

Inside the Portal: 25/12/2645 20:18

The next thing Deepa knew she was on the bridge of Bijlirani, in her uniform, sitting as she had been when they entered the portal.

'Rom, how long have we been in the portal?'

Rom swung round and looked oddly at Deepa.

'Madam Deepa, from the moment we entered the portal to the moment you began that question was zero point seven of a second. Why do you ask?'

'Less than a second?'

'That is correct, in fact exactly 0.6987 seconds if that is of concern.'

'Less than a second!' Chandra cried out, that's impossible!'

‘Dr Chandra, I shall check the instrumentation if you wish for any calibration errors.’

‘No Rom, that won’t be necessary, Chandra good to see you, what happened to you?’

Chandra looked bashful, ‘Deepa its hard to explain, I seemed to merge with Gopika and found myself here.’

Deepa blushed, ‘Chandra, it is even harder for me to tell you how I came back here, suffice it to say, I also merged with somebody and found myself here.’

‘Madam Deepa’ Rom broke in, ‘Can you explain the disappearance of passengers David and Emily to me, sensors indicate they are no longer on the ship, but I did not observe them leaving the bridge, let alone the ship.’

Chandra stared at Deepa, ‘they must have found another way out, do you think the access shaft?’

‘Maybe Chandra, perhaps we will find out one day.’

Suddenly she started and looked around, ‘Chopra?’

‘Ah, Radhika... Deepa?’ Chopra blinked and stared around him.

‘What happened to you Chopra?’ Deepa asked with already a strong suspicion in her mind at the mention of the name “Radhika”.

‘I’m sure I wouldn’t like to say Madam Deepa,’ Said Chopra looking shamefaced.

‘Enough’ said Deepa, ‘perhaps some things are better left unsaid.’

Deepa turned her attention to Uravashi as Chandra did to Natasha.

Both were looking stunned as if they had been through terrible ordeals.

‘What happened to you?’

Neither said anything for a moment. Then Uravashi said.

‘I cannot speak of what happened to me, it was unspeakable.’

Natasha shivered, ‘Nor yet will I tell what happened to me.’

Many years later Natasha swore Chandra to secrecy and told him what she had experienced. Chandra agreed it was better not to tell that tale, some things should not be told, and Natasha’s tale was one such story. She had not emerged in a forest glade but in an altogether less delightful place. Only after hearing her story did Chandra realise how lucky he and Deepa had been to land in the land of the Yakshis and not the Nagas realm. Uravashi never told her tale to anybody, but the

word “Yaksa” made her quiver if ever it was mentioned in her presence.

Metropolis Acropolis: 17/11/443 20:18

Chang spat out the stone casement window.

As his spit fell it froze in the ice cold air that blew the winter snows over the huddle slate and thatch roofs of the city of Metropolis. By the time the spit approached the ground it was a tiny ball of dirty ice, falling, tumbling through empty space. It hit.

‘Fuck! What was that you bastards!’

Vera screamed waving her fist into the air and making an obscene gesture.

‘Piss artists, dropping things on me, mother...’ The sound of her words were lost as she burred to her self and settled down again into the pile of rags and straw that was her home. She almost forgot sometimes where she was here, in fact she was thinking ‘If I am lucky I might get some beer at the tavern later in the day when the troops come back from leave, they’ll be feeling generous today, I can feel it in my bones.’ Then she felt a sharp pain in her wizened knees and remembered that the only thing she really felt in her bones these days was the pain of arthritis in the joints.

‘Err, what’s up, what you poking at an old women for?’

She giggled looking up at the trooper standing there and poking her with his staff.

‘Want some fun sonny? Is that it eh?’

She broke down into waves of cackling.

Looking down at the pile of rags and bones that was the old bag lady Vera he held his nose from the rank smell that was welling up in his direction even in the cold.

‘Shit’ Nico thought to himself, ‘Why do I get dumped with all the rubbish jobs.’ He had been relaxing in the guard house to the acropolis, chewing on a clove and not bothering anybody when that so and so the Centurion from Antioch, what was the bastards, name? Oh yes, Stephanos, had spotted him and called out his name.

‘Nico, Go and bring the old mad woman who lives outside the keep, by the privies, and bring her in and get her hosed down and then bring her to me. By the end of the watch, or your dog meat, Do you hear me?’

So here he was trying to get the woman to come with him. As if that was going to be a problem. Everybody knew what she wanted.

‘Come on Vera, time to get up, the Centurion has a present for you.’

‘A present?’ Her eyes narrowed. She clearly didn’t believe him.

‘A present for old Vera? The Centurion?’ She subsided into cackles of laughter.

‘Wine.’

‘Ah why didn’t you say so dearie, wine it is then is it?’

She got up and shuffled behind him into the guard house. She shrieked and screamed all manner of obscenities at him when he explained she needed to bathe first and change into a plain white toga, rather than her piles of rags. But eventually, encouraged by him waving his staff at her she bathed and dressed.

‘How do I look now dearie?’ She asked him as they stood outside the Centurion’s door, ‘bit of all right eh?’

Nico shook his head, her emaciated body freed from its piles of rags was skin and bone, her hair half gone from her head hung in straggly white strands from her blotchy skull and her eyes stared at him from deeply lined sockets. Perhaps it was her teeth he thought to himself, ragged and rotten hardly even there, which smelled so bad in her breath. But how could so few teeth smell so bad.

Still, as the watch drum sounded on the gateway he had to accept that however she was, this is how he would have to present her to the Centurion.

‘Trooper Nico reporting as ordered with...’ God what was he to call the old bag? ‘The person you requested me to bring to you, Miss Vera.’

Vera fell over laughing when she heard this, despite the imperious glare of the Centurion.

‘Mrs Vera Chang, please is my name, not “Miss”, now where is this drink you promised me in return for all this malarkey my lad?’ She turned and looked at Nico.

‘Shut up,’ he hissed, and added in an undertone, ‘you get the drink later.’

Vera tapped the side of her nose and grinned.

‘Trooper Nico, you will accompany me and prisoner to the New Governor in his chambers.’

Vera stared around her, ‘What prisoner?’ she asked and then seeing nobody else around backed away against the wall saying ‘No, no sonny, I am just a harmless old lady, what have I done to harm you?’

‘Trooper, seize the prisoner and bring her with you.’ The Centurion sighed and added. ‘Do play along my dear Lady, and you will get a drink later I promise you.’

At this Vera’s eyes lit up, so the Trooper and the Centurion were maybe not such a bad lot after all, although she didn’t trust this talk of prisoner. It reminded her of how it had been at first.

Fifty, sixty, seventy years? Who cared how long ago, a lifetime had passed. Yet still she remembered. She had been a young woman, an officer in the glorious People’s Liberation Army. Together she and her husband General Chang had succeeded in stealing an alien space ship from the Buddhist splittists who rejected the democratic will of the people’s representatives. She still remembered the audacity of the deed, it would live forever in the annals of the revolution they thought.

But, something had gone wrong, as they entered the alien portal structure in the ship a white mist, like a blizzard, had blocked her vision and when she came round she was standing with Chang and the comrades on a dusty hillock crowned by a date palm grove in the midst of a rocky valley. She had found herself dressed in a ridiculous ethnic minorities costume that reminded her of pictures of her grand parents before they had been lucky enough to find a place in a re education camp.

‘What’s happened Chang? Where are we?’ She had asked her husband.

‘Vera, we were on the alien ship, this must be some illusion created by counter-revolutionary groups in order to trick us.’

‘Comrades, can any of you account for this subversion?’

The comrades could not and remained silent, fearing that the first to speak might suffer.

‘Chang,’ Vera said, ‘can you see the dust rising in the distance over there?’

Vera had spotted a dust cloud moving up the dry valley. Moments later she saw the horsemen, wild tribal types they looked to her, like nobody she had ever seen on Shaolin, galloping in their direction.

‘Comrades form a protective square’ Chang shouted out.

They had stood firm in a square formation as the horsemen rode up, barbarians it seemed dressed in furs and rags and carrying primitive spears and swords. No match for the People's Liberation Army finest cohort, Vera thought to herself. Unfortunately she had forgotten the saying that power comes from the end of a gun, or in this case a lance.

Chang stood proud in their vanguard and roared out at the horsemen.

'I am General Chang, of the PLA, I demand to speak to a party...'

He got no further before a lance from the enemy silenced him. In the melee that followed the struggle put up by the PLA was over in a matter of minutes. Soon chained together they were trudging through the hot sun. Chang was not seriously injured and was slung roughly over the back of a horse like a sack of potatoes and carried unceremoniously along.

Vera tried to speak to the enemy. 'Who are you where are you taking us?'

But the answer was not in any language she knew. Bactrian Greek had not been on the syllabus at her school. Now she knew it better than Chinese or English, but then nothing.

So they had been brought into the city through the gardens and fields that surrounded it and marched through the central markets bustling with life and up to the acropolis that marked the centre of Metropolis. Least ways that was the name she had learned for it in the years that came, in later years it became known as Ghazni.

They didn't understand what had happened at all, later she learnt that they had been found in the Governor's date grove. Their crimes were many: they were trespassing, worse they were obviously foreigners, worse still they had nothing worth stealing. Still, the governor of the time reckoned they looked a well dressed bunch of Barbarians and as when an interpreter had been found and they discovered they had a "General" as their head, he decided that perhaps somebody would ransom them. So he threw the men into jail, to await their ransom and, so as to make some money immediately, sold the exotic looking women to the brothels of the town.

Nobody came to ransom the men.

Vera and her companions had been the talk of the town for a while, the Eastern beauties they were called, from far away Cathy they claimed. Nobody cared, and they suffered what life brings to those deprived of a chance to live a decent life. One by one her comrades

had died, first only the odd one. Chu slain by a drunken soldier, Xian, in childbirth, Mee, from a wasting disease, and so it had gone on as the years passed. The last had died many years back, not long after the last brothel in town which would house her declared her an incurable drunk and threw her out onto the street.

Once when her beauty and fortune had been famous throughout the city she had tried to ransom Chang herself. But to no avail. What business was it of a courtesan to ransom a man from jail? The governor simply took her money anyway and threw her out into the street.

Even so she hoped one day to meet Chang again, and in this one hope she had patiently lived all her life, she had born everything with this one hope in her heart. To at least see Chang again.

‘Down on your knees, woman, you are in the presence of the governor!’

‘Eh?’ she started from her reverie, she tended to get lost in daydreams nowadays a lot it seemed. ‘Bugger, where the hell am I?’ She looked around and saw the Centurion’s fist about to swipe her head and fell to the ground quick enough to miss being hit by it, but not the floor.

‘Centurion, are you sure this is the woman?’

‘Yes your honour, she lives under the window of the prison cells, waiting for her husband’s release.’

‘Humm,’ The Governor frowned, ‘What’s your name woman?’

‘Vera Chang, Mrs Vera Chang.’

The Governor consulted a scroll on his desk, ‘That seems to be correct then.’

He turned and motioned to another guard. ‘Bring the other one in.’

Moments later another door opened and a second guard brought in an old man dressed in a white robe. He was quite bald but his long beard seemed to be graceful on his face which still hinted at a kind of nobility behind the lines and furrows of great age. He fell to his knees without prompting, years of captivity had taught him when to stand up and when to give way.

‘Prisoner, your name is “General” Donald Chang, is that correct?’

‘Yes, your honour.’

The Governor lay on his couch behind his desk and supporting himself on his arms made a curious speech, Nico could not figure out

for the life of him why he bothered to speak to the prisoners. He looked as if he was reading from the scroll.

‘The Bactrian Kingdom’s is known for its modernity and liberality,’ he paused evidently struck by the idiocy of saying this in this context and added, ‘although you would not know it looking at you two.’ He resumed his imperious tone, ‘Citizens you will be glad to know that recently our Gracious Majesty Antiochos the Sixth has concluded a treaty with the Satrap of Khotan which had brought peace to the disputed lands around Balk. In pursuance to this treaty it is my duty to release all prisoners, including those held for ransom, from Cathy or its dominions.’

He slipped into a more informal tone. ‘Centurion, how long has this man been a prisoner?’

‘Sixty four years, sir!’

‘What crime did he commit?’

‘Failing to produce a ransom to have himself released, sir!’

The new governor shook his head.

‘How many were in his party when he was captured?’

‘Twenty four, sir!’

‘How many are still alive?’

‘One old man and one old woman, sir!’

‘Do you seriously expect them to be ransomed now?’

The Centurion frowned and looked at his shoes. Then said.

‘It is still possible, sir!’

‘Rubbish Centurion, the previous governor was an uncivilised oaf, nobody is going to ransom this man, and he is the last prisoner in the tower cell block. The rest have been moved to the new more modern facility in the dungeons. He is in the way, and it is pointless to keep an old man in prison for no reason.’

He paused then said, ‘By the power vested in me by his majesty Antiochos the Sixth, I hereby pardon you and you are released from this moment.’

He gestured to Nico.

‘Now get these relics out of my sight, chuck them out into the street.’

After they were gone he looked again at the scroll. It was not actually anything to do with a peace treaty, nor yet with a pardon. It was the plans for the new apartments he was going to build in the

tower. He had been serious about the last governor being an oaf, he had not seen that the tower rooms were fit for a king, or his representative, not for prisoners. No, Bactria was moving with the times and he needed new apartments to suit the times. He never paid a second thought to the old man and women again.

‘Bastards!’ Vera cried as a boot on the backside was all she got instead of wine when they tossed her out the postillion gate. She landed up in a heap against the old man. The old man looked at her strangely, she looked back and then he said.

‘Vera! I never thought to see you alive again!’

‘Donald! Nor I you, why...’ she chuckled, ‘you don’t look a day over a hundred!’

Chang laughed, ‘Nor you either darling, I guess we are the last of our cadre.’

Vera sighed, ‘I am the last of the women to live, that is true, and from your words I guess you are the last of the men.’

‘We must waste no time Comrade Vera,’ Chang said, ‘we shall retrace our steps to where we were captured and try to find a way back to the ship.’

‘Why of course Comrade, you are right, the ship.’

Somehow the shock of everything drove the haze from her mind that she had fallen into over the years and she felt alive again for the first time in years.

So it was that the two of them, just as they were, started to walk out of the town back towards the Date Palm orchard. Maybe the road was longer than their memories suggested, maybe they were just so much older that it seemed longer. Or perhaps they were on the wrong road. They never knew. They hobbled together out of the town, down the steep winding alleys and into the fields. For a while they stopped in the morning sun under a tree by a well.

‘Donald, what kept you alive all these years?’ Vera asked.

‘One thing, from the window of our cell I could see out over the city to a peak on the edge of the valley. On it there was a lone pine tree that stood proud on its summit. I would watch the tree, noting how it bent in the winds and flexed in the gales and storms that blew in the winter.’

He sighed and looked into the distance. ‘From it I learnt that strength lies in bending with the wind, not like an oak standing rigid against

the wind. It was my guiding light and so I kept alive the fire in my heart all these years. I never let the winds of adversity blow it out. I knew that one day, if only I could wait patiently and practised fortitude with all my heart, then one day I would regain the ship.'

Vera laughed, 'Whilst I waited patiently and bore every misfortune with equanimity in the thought that one day I would see you again.'

After a while they decided to walk on and they began to slowly advance under the hot noon day sun into the dry and dusty landscape. The way was hard over rocks and gravel in places, but they pressed on. Eventually they came to a dry well in the midst of the path and as the heat was so great sat down to rest their aching bones for a while.

Chang and Vera sat staring at the sun, both resolute in their practice of patience and convinced they would eventually find their way. The sun was burning bright and its light filled their eyes with a radiance that eclipsed all else. The last thing that Chang knew was the sound of his heart beating resolutely like a drum driving him on towards his goal. Then he slipped into unconsciousness. Vera sitting beside him never noticed any change, she was lost in a reverie. The sun's light had begun to feel cold to her she realised and it had reminded her of how her grandfather had described the lake frozen over with ice in Kunming at the times when the winds blew from the Himalayas and whistled around the pagoda on the island. She felt herself somehow merge with the wind in her dream.

'Comrade Vera!' Chang's cry woke her from her dream.

She was looking at the young Chang again, resplendent in his blue uniform.

'What kind of a dream is this Donald?'

'No dream Vera we are back on the alien ship, but where are the cadre members?'

Vera jumped up and looked around, then stopped and looked down, her limbs were straight, the joints on her fingers were not swollen with arthritis, and her skin was fair and smooth, no liver spots.

'I am young again!' She cried out in joy, 'How is this possible?'

'How long has passed since we entered the portal? It must be more than sixty years, surely we must be near the exit.' Chang cried out and checked the instruments. Then fell back against his seat.

'What kind of a devilish place is this?'

‘What is wrong darling? Vera asked shocked by the white expression of horror on Chang’s face.

‘Vera, we have been less than a minute in the portal, we have suffered a whole lifetime of patient waiting in adversity, in less than a minute of real time.’

They both sat frozen in their seats and stared at the view screen. All thought of their lost companions driven from their minds by the realisation of the impossibility of understanding what had happened to them on their way through the portal.

Inside the Portal: 25/12/2645 20:18

‘Status report Rom?’

‘Elapsed duration of time in portal three point one minutes, observational data appears to show the portal ending up ahead, estimated time of exiting portal, two point five minutes.’

‘God I will be glad to get out of here,’ Chopra shuddered, ‘I admit there were the good sides to what we experienced, but I wouldn’t want to risk it again if I could help it.’

‘Me neither,’ Chandra said. Natasha and Uravashi remained silent.

‘Madam Deepa, sensors indicate a human life form on the port bow up ahead inside the structure of the ring.’

‘What the devil,’ Deepa said, ‘At this speed there is nothing we can do we will be a half a light year ahead before we can stop and we will be out of the gateway.’

‘Damn,’ Chandra thought, ‘If only we could find out who was there.’

‘But darling, you can,’ a voice seemed to whisper in his mind.

With a jolt he saw he was drifting free of his body again on the bridge. Only this time he could see Deepa and Chopra doing the same. Like a flight of three wild geese they wheeled around the ship and turned and flew off towards the grating matrix on the side of the tunnel. This time again it was different. He did not lose consciousness as he passed through the grating and he saw he had entered a vast cavernous space. It was dusk. Gradually he realised he was flying low over a range of rocky hills with scrubby bush growth on them. He saw it was an almost circular bowl shaped range of hills and he was coming down onto a level area on the hill side just inside the inner rim of the bowl.

As he landed he felt his feet hit the ground with a distinct “thunk”.

‘Bugger,’ Chopra said, ‘Here we go again.’

‘Odd,’ Deepa said, ‘No costumes in this show, we all seem to be wearing our space suits this time just like we were on the bridge.’

‘Deepa, do you recognise this place?’

‘No Chandra, but it clearly is not the forest, we need to take care the locals may not be as friendly as last time.’

‘There is some sort of town in the centre of the valley,’ Chopra said pointing down into the lowlands.

In amongst the trees and bamboo groves they could see houses. Thatched and tiled roofs and the occasional flat roof. At the very centre of the valley there was a complex of wooden walls and towers, like an ancient castle or fortress. From the spires and pinnacle on its topmost towers banners and pennants fluttered in the breeze.

‘Madam Deepa, should we go there first? Or should we press on up this slope to the edge of the valley and see what is outside the range of hills?’

Chandra broke in, ‘If I may say, I have learnt to my cost that not to survey to begin with is an error. We must not go to the town first, Deepa let us climb to this peak nearby and investigate first.’

Deepa nodded to show her agreement and they started to wend their way up the hill towards the rocky crag on its peak. In the gloom Chandra could have sworn he was flying forms, like vultures, hovering over the peak.

It was almost night when they reached near the summit. At first they could see nothing. Then they started to notice a glow in the air around the summit.

‘Madam, Dr Chandra, lets keep back from the very peak for the moment eh, and see what happens.’ Chopra said quietly.

The silence which greeted his suggestion spoke volumes. The three stood in the shadows by a rocky ledge as an ethereal light began to build around the summit.

‘There is somebody sitting in meditation up there.’ Chandra whispered to Deepa. She nodded and Chopra simply glanced at him and raised and lowered his eyebrows.

As the light grew they thought they saw a sage dressed in orange robes with long white hair sitting in seated meditation posture on the

very summit. The sage was sitting so that they were standing behind the sage's back.

Then in an instant the scene changed. A brilliant ray of light appeared which abruptly began to shoot from the peak of the sage's head into the zenith of the heavens above. By its light they could see that all around a host of figures were gathered. Like themselves the forms of men and women stood clustered in groups of three, six, twelve and more all around. Some were clad in simple robes, some in gorgeous outfits, some in monks or nuns robes, and some were naked. Some were not quite human at all, some seemed like the Yakshis of the glade, some, gathered in the watercourses on the hill, seemed to be half human and half serpent. All were facing the peak with palms held together in salutation. Deepa looked up into the air and in an awed tone said.

‘There are watchers in the sky too!’

All around hanging in the air were numberless half human and half alien creatures ranked in host upon host staring with adoration at the sage on the rocks. There were winged figures seemingly dancing in the sky bearing garlands in their hands and playing lutes and harps. There were others who seemed more light than substance, yet others whose presence was harder still to detect as they seemed to be more a fragrance in the air than a form which could be grasped with the eyes.

One figure more radiant than the others in the air settled by the side of the sage. The brightness grew so intense that it became impossible to tell how many figures were sitting or standing on the peak. One, two, three, maybe more, it just was not possible to say. For what seemed an incalculable eternity Chandra's mind seemed to fill with sounds, or thoughts or smells, he knew not what it was in truth and then he thought he heard a string of syllables ring out which seemed to illuminate the entire cosmos with their lustre.

“Om Svaha, gateh gateh paragateh parasamgateh bodhi svaha!”

Imperceptibly at first and then with quickening pace the brightness began to fade. After a few moments the images of watching figures began to fade and as the luminosity on the peak faded away the column of light seemed to attenuate into a faintly perceptible glow and then to wink out abruptly.

‘They’ve all gone!’ Chopra cried, ‘Look over there I could have sworn there was a couple standing over there, but now they have gone.’

‘It’s as if they were all never there to begin with,’ Chandra said looking around.

‘Let’s check out the peak now guys.’ Deepa said and headed up the path.

‘Heh, there is somebody still there, slumped on the ground, careful.’

Deepa held out her arm to hold the others back and slowly advanced on the figure. The person had collapsed on the ground and was shaking as if in the grips of sobbing fit they could not control.

‘Hello, Can I help?’ Deepa said bending down next to the figure.

‘What is happening Deepa?’ Chandra said standing beside her and looking down at the figure who he now saw was not a white haired sage in a saffron robe at all, but a blonde haired woman in an orange jump suit that looked faintly familiar to him somehow. The woman’s face was hidden by her hair as she sat hunched over and sobbing into her lap.

‘Its a woman Chandra!’ Deepa cried out in astonishment.

At the sound of the name “Chandra” the figure suddenly looked up and said in a faltering voice full of tears.

‘Chandra, thank god you are here, where am I?’

Chandra stared at the woman’s face and for a moment he could not say anything. His mind went back two and half years in time to the dreadful moment when Cindy had stepped out of the lift and fallen to the ground deep in the heart of Tau Ceti III.

He bents down and folded his arms around Cindy and lifted her sobbing form up and embraced it and said.

‘Cindy, its okay, I am here now, it must have been dreadful lost for years in this place. I can’t imagine how you must have suffered.’

Cindy looked at him through tear stained eyes with a look of incredulity on her face.

‘Two and a half years? Why are you saying that Chandra? I just stepped out of the lift a moment ago and when I came to I found myself all alone in this place and thought you had all left me here. Then moments later you and this woman came up. Who is she? Why did you say two and a half years? I don’t understand what’s going on.’

Neither did Chandra for a moment. Deepa spoke up.

‘My name is Deepa, and this is Chopra, we are companions of Chandra on a journey. He has told me about you before.’ She shook her head.

‘None of us understand what is going on, don’t feel alone in that Cindy.’

They all sat down on the peak and stared at each other.

‘Where is the lift Chandra?’ Cindy asked.

‘It was in a different place in a different time.’ Chandra sighed, ‘Cindy, two and a half years ago when you stepped out of the lift on Tau Ceti III you passed through some sort of alien force field or something, damn, to be honest I have no idea what happened. What we thought had happened was that you had died, we tried to rescue you, but you were dead. We tried to bring your body back, but we lost your body on the return trip from the cavern on Tau Ceti III.’

He stared at Cindy’s face as he held her hands in his.

‘Cindy for you it has only been an instant, for the rest of the world it has been years. I have lived with the sorrow of your loss for all that time. But somehow it seems that I was wrong to believe you dead all along.’

Cindy frowned and wiped the tears from her eyes.

‘So you are telling me that this is not Tau Ceti III? Where are we then?’

Deepa said quietly.

‘Cindy we are in some kind of alien gateway or portal. A passage way between our universe and another it seems. We don’t really know where we are or what is happening to be honest. One moment we were on our space ship, the next, we were in some kind of a strange place... which perhaps we can talk about later... then we were back on the ship. And now we are back inside the alien artefact. Don’t you remember anything after you stepped out of the lift before you heard my voice?’

‘There was a bright light, first green, then gold, then white, then darkness. That’s all I remember. Can we go back to your ship now please. I feel like I need time to recover from the shock of it all.’

She paused as suddenly something sank in about what Chandra had said.

‘How can I have been dead? I am alive! How could you have carried my body away? My body is here.’

As she said this she ran her hands over her shoulders and down her sides as if to confirm that she was real.

‘This is all too much,’ she wailed and began to weep again.

‘I want to go home.’

Chopra who had been sitting quietly all the time watching said.

‘She has got a point I think, how can we go home, how can we even get back to the ship?’

Deepa frowned and said slowly, ‘Perhaps we will have to practice another perfection to get back again this time as well.’

Chandra nodded, ‘Yes I think we probably will do, this time though why don’t we start by sitting quietly and just trying to understand things as they really are. Let’s see if we can see things just as they are and that may help us to understand our situation.’

So they all sat in a circle on the peak and joined hands. Instead of trying to understand the phenomenal world around them they just quietly adopted the posture for meditation and tried to calm their minds. They contemplated what was happening without judging, without condemning. They gave up all thought of the past and the future knowing that you cannot live in the past and you cannot live in the future: you can only live in the present moment. There was nobody to hear, see or sense anything. In the hearing was only hearing, in the seeing only seeing, in the feeling only feeling, in touching only touching and in smelling only smelling. From moment to moment they sensed that when they breathed in there was breathing in, when they breathed out there was breathing out. No names, no forms, just consciousness, mental processes going on, matter and that which is unconditioned by anything.

‘Madam Deepa, we will exit the artefact in three point zero four minutes. Do you wish me to take any action concerning the human life signs on the sensors I detected?’

‘Negative Rom, no need for any action.’

‘Security alert! Madam Deepa unauthorised person on bridge!’ Rom cried out slipping into automatic mode and swinging up his weapons systems so that they were trained on a bewildered looking Cindy who was sitting in the place where Emily had sat.

‘Negative Rom, this is Cindy she is with us.’

It was all too much for Cindy who broke down in floods of tears again. Chandra put his arm round her shoulder and guided her back to

a cabin where she could lie down. The ship's doctor, Dr Sharma, was called and after he gave her a sedative she slipped rapidly into sleep. As she lay gazing up into Chandra's eyes she smiled weakly at him and said. 'I'm so glad to be out of the Portal Chandra.'

'Odd,' Chandra thought to himself on his way back to the bridge.

'I must have forgotten she had green eyes.'

All thought of this was driven from his mind by the next few moments.

'Exit from artefact immanent, please prepare for transition into... somewhere.'

Rom was lost for words apparently.

Chandra stared at the forward view screen the end of the tunnel rushed towards them. He leaned over towards Deepa on his right and said. 'Let's hope that we end up someplace easier to understand than where we have been recently.'

Deepa nodded and smiled back at him. 'I second that. Lets hope the natives are friendly as well.'

'Exit in, five, four, three, two, one, zero.' Uravashi counted down.

At the moment they intersected the lens of light it seemed as if every particle in Deepa's body quivered in a kind of strange rapture.

'Free at last!' Deepa cried out aloud as they emerged from the portal. Then she thought, 'Funny, I didn't intend to say that at all, why on Earth did I think that as we left the portal?'

Some where: some time

'Warning, sensor malfunction, incompatible data, warning.' Rom said clearly slipping into his automatic relay mode and passing on information from ship systems.

'Ruddy hell!' Was Chopra's way of putting it.

'Don't stop!' Was Deepa's.

'What is this place?' Was Uravashi's.

Silence was Chandra's.

They were not in space. They were flying over a landscape. A wide landscape of rolling hills and winding valleys with forests on the uplands and pasture land by the river banks. There were no signs of habitation. Yet it didn't look completely wild.

'Madam Deepa, the data from sensors suggests we are flying over a surface that stretches beyond the reach of our sensors. No flat land

surface could be that big. I shall therefore check the sensors as they appear to be malfunctioning.’ Rom said and slipped into silence as he began to analyse all the data again.

‘Chandra what do you think?’ Deepa asked.

Chandra stared into the distance and said, ‘The great city on the shores of the sea of infinity.’

‘Eh?’ Said Chopra, ‘what city? I can’t see one.’

‘We will, Champa told us the way led to the great city, it must be up ahead somewhere.’

‘Rom, Uravashi, check for any signs of a city on remote scans.’ Deepa ordered.

‘Negative,’ they reported.

‘Take us up Chopra into orbit, or whatever counts as orbit in this place.’

In response to Chopra’s directions to the helm controls Bijlirani began to climb and at an altitude of five miles high they began to be able to sense the vastness of the landscape. It was as if it had no limit but stretched infinitely in all directions. At seven miles high they climbed above the atmosphere and expected to see the stars. Deepa looked on the sensor arrays that looked upwards and saw nothing.

‘There are no stars Chandra, what kind of a place is this?’

Uravashi broke in before Chandra could reply.

‘Deepa, data from sensors is starting to make sense now. It is apparently not a planet we are flying over at all. We are in ...’

‘Don’t tell me its a Tunnel!’ Deepa said and slumped back in her seat.

‘No I wasn’t going to.’

Saying that Uravashi jumped from her seat and ran to the forward view screen and pointed to the right side of the screen. ‘Rom, swing the sensors to show this region.’

The screen swung round and revealed a line of space where there were stars. A line along the horizon.

‘Now move the sensors through 360 degrees Rom.’

The screen view panned round the whole panorama. A narrow band of stars ran right around the horizon.

‘Do you see Deepa? We are not flying over a planet nor in a tunnel. We are in a vast disk. A disk as wide as the diameter of the earth and

above our heads sensors are indicating another disk about a thousand miles away.

‘I really don’t know how much more of this I can take,’ Chopra said.

‘How can something like this exist at all?’

‘As opposed to forest fairies in a ring in space you mean?’ Deepa asked.

‘Well at least that was simply fantastic and perhaps it was just a hallucination created by those Yakshi women. This looks real, yet seems impossible.’

Uravashi had been studying the monitors closely and suddenly spoke again.

‘Direct the visual sensors onto the centre of the disk, if you thought the last thing was strange, get this, there is a central spindle to the disk which forms a kind of central mountain, apparently joining the disk below to the disk above us. What’s more there seems to be a kind of miniature sun revolving around the central mountain and a moon... no make that four moons... also revolving around the mountain.’

‘Madam Deepa,’ Rom awoke from his checking of all the systems. ‘I have checked all the sensors and they are functioning properly. However, I am still having trouble understanding the data and creating a satisfactory model to account for it. However, preliminary input from Uravashi’s speculations seems to indicate we are in another sort of artefact.’

‘That’s it!’ Cried Uravashi, ‘As the sun spins around the spindle it casts light onto the surface, but the area behind the spindle relative to its position is in darkness. That’s how night and day are created on the disk.’

As they looked again at the inner surface of the cylinder they realised that it had four great continents on it, like the leaves of a clover. There were also seas and other land masses in a patch work pattern like a complex embroidered quilt. Great and small islands and archipelagos of islands in an infinite maze of designs.

‘Who could have built such an artefact?’ Chandra questioned.

‘God knows,’ Uravashi replied. ‘And why build such an artefact?’

Chandra said in frustration, ‘So what is this thing?’

‘I can tell you if you really want to know darling,’ Chandra seemed to hear Gopika’s voice.

Chandra stared around, ‘Gopika?’

Moments later Chandra saw a lustre grew on the bridge around him and realised that particles of glittering light were beginning to emerge from every pore of his body. They started to coalesce and flow together and took on the form of Gopika standing beside him and facing him and Deepa.

Gopika said quietly, 'I know the answers to your questions.'

She spoke as if from absolute certainty, 'Those who built this were the first Buddhas, and its not an "artefact", it is the "Great Vehicle" of the Buddhas.'

'Gopika, how did you do that? How do you know that?'

Gopika looked down at the floor and then said softly.

'I'm so sorry Chandra, I have had to deceive you somewhat. As Gopika I could not leave the portal. I had to take on another form to do so. So I had to become one with somebody to escape from the portal and your kindness offered me a way out.'

Chandra was stunned, unable to figure out what to say. As he stared at her he noticed that her jewellery didn't look quite the same as before either. Now it had flashing lights in set in it, here and there what looked like read out and data were displayed on her belts and bangles and he realised that the Yakshi's jewellery was not just for decoration. He didn't know what to begin to ask Gopika.

Deepa though knew full well what she wanted to know.

'Even if you are Gopika that still doesn't explain to me how you know this is the space ship of the first Buddhas, nor yet why you were trapped in the portal, or why you had to hide in a human form to escape from the portal.'

She glared at Gopika.

Gopika shook her head. 'You are not going to like my answer.'

'Like it or not what I need to know is the truth Gopika.'

'Very well then. Know this, you have entered a world at war with itself. Perhaps you expect Buddhas to be wiser than yourself, indeed they are, but those who you call gods are not. Here a war has been waged for aeons now between two factions of the gods on this ship, the faction of the thirty three gods, the 33 as they are known, and the hosts of the Movement for Altering the Relativity Alignment, or Mara for short.

It is said that when the journey began we all lived in peace together and shared a common vision. I cannot remember that time, only the strife that now reigns here.

The portal entry point to your Buddha field was controlled by the 33. We, the Yakshis, are loyal to the First Buddhas, and to the 33 and we had been on a mission in your Buddha field but when we returned to the portal we were trapped in it by Mara who had taken control of the tunnel entry and exit points. We hid in the habitat ring in the portal hoping to eventually find a way out or be rescued. When we saw your ships we knew that we could escape in them, Mara would not deign to send their hosts to destroy them as they would seem so insignificant to them and would not scan your ships carefully either. So to escape we had to assume human form and travel on your ships. That is my story, believe it or not, it is the truth.'

'You said "we" just then, what do you mean?' Deepa said suspiciously, 'I see only you standing there.'

Then a voice in her mind said, 'Darling Deepa, did I not say plainly to you. "Let us be one?"'

Deepa felt a strange feeling and felt a flow of particles from her body emerging into the air next to her and moments later Champa was standing beside her.

Chopra grinned and said, 'I suppose this means?'

The lustre of the Yakshi glow grew bright around him and when it faded, Radhika was sitting on Chopra's lap and twirling his moustaches in her fingertips.

'Means what Mr Chopra?' Radhika asked.

The moment faded instantly when Champa stamped her foot and shouted out. 'No time for fun and games folk in this place.'

She looked intently at Deepa and fixed her eyes on hers.

'Deepa, there is no time to loose, we must head down, at a bearing of 357.34 from here, towards the Southern continent of Jumbudvipa and land at once at the space port at Vajrasana and seek shelter there or we will soon be destroyed by one of Mara's patrols.' Champa said staring imploringly at Deepa.

'Why should I believe you?'

In response Rom spoke, 'unidentified ships approaching fast from the zenith.'

Champa, shook her head, ‘no time to doubt us Deepa, believe me or be destroyed, it is your decision.’

Deepa knew how to take decisions, ‘Emergency mode dive to the surface and get us on a heading of 357.34 as you go.’

The die was cast. ‘Jambudvipa here we come.’ Chopra said.

Same place: Shortly before some other time

‘Virhulapa 7 to Kumbhipak ground station do you read me?’

‘Reading you loud and clear Virhulapa 7.’

‘Unauthorised activity in sector 84,576 at portal SGB 25.’

‘Nature of activity?’

‘Hostile-wise positive intrusion of FB 16-B craft.’

‘Check, can you copy that Virhulapa, confirm, First Buddha Type 16-B ship has entered the disk?’

‘Check.’

‘That ship type has been obsolete for aeons, it cannot have any of the 33 or Buddhas on, it poses no threat, alert status gamma.’

‘Resolution-wise outcome?’

‘Destroy the ship at your leisure, but feel free to first remove any useful fixtures and fittings which interest you, Khumbipak ground station, over and out.’

Virhulapa grinned, ‘Nice, we get to loot the crate and trash it, our lucky day my friend. Lets go get the baby.’

‘Yeehaw!’ Cried Baital as he kicked the pedals down with his talons and their craft swooped like a vulture down on the Cylinder ship.

Virhulapa and his buddy Baital enjoyed their work. Okay it was boring sometimes, but what job wasn’t? He had been hanging around in the cremation ground back home, just kicking back and chewing on a bone when he had been recruited.

‘Hey there you sonny you look a healthy young vampire ever thought of joining the army?’ The recruiting Asura had said looking up at Baital hanging in his favourite spot upside down in the tree

‘Nah, too much hassle.’

The Asura floated up into the air next to him and flipped over so he was hanging upside down, like a regular guy. Then he flicked open a glossy looking recruiting brochure that was dripping with what looked like fake blood.

‘So bogus,’ Said Baital, ‘fake blood, so you reckon I am just going to say,’ and he tried to sound really sarcastic ‘I am going to join the army,’ he sniggered, ‘Heh? Mr bigshot Asura guy?’

‘You said it sonny, and its Colonel Bigshot Asura Guy, to you Private!’

That had been, what ten, twenty, hell knows how many thousand years ago. Still he and his buddy Virhulapa, who was Southern boy like himself, had had a lot of fun since they were put on this patrol duty lark.

They dropped like a hawk on to the Cylinder. Hooked the Cylinder in the clamps on their craft and hacked the end off its hull in a moment as if they were cutting open a coconut to extract its milk. Then the two of them, three metre high figures in armoured suits swung into the hull and made their way forward, smashing and looting as they went. They entered the bridge and stopped seeing Vera and Chang.

‘Well, Well, Well, what do we have here?’ Baital said.

‘Human type food,’ Virhulapa said licking his lips.

‘In lovely gift wrapping in the little one’s case.’ Baital added.

‘Boy, is it somebody’s unlucky day to today,’ Virhulapa cackled.

They advanced on the two.

‘Odd’ thought Virhulapa ‘they don’t seem to show the slightest fear.’

‘Come to me my pretty,’ Baital hissed, drool pouring in anticipation from his fangs.

As Baital approached the woman she winked her green eyes at him.

‘Sassy baby.’ He smiled back.

Virhulapa was taking a more a cautious approach he decided to jump the big guy and take him out all at once. He pounced as Baital lunged.

They were right. It was an unlucky day for some.

It was not only the Yakshis who had taken the opportunity offered by the human visitors to escape from the ring.

The instant the demons attacked they were simply snuffed out of existence utterly. Their victims, smiled at each other and walked out of the Cylinder craft, caring nothing for the cold vacuum of space as they walked into the Vulture class type patrol vehicle of the unfortunate Virhulapa and Baital.

They disengaged the clamps on the Cylinder ship and it drifted away in space.

For a few moment the forms in the driving seats seemed to change: for an instant Vera and Chang, for an instant Virhulapa and Baital, for an instant a tall dark man with penetrating eyes and a woman in black cocktail dress and for an instant just clouds of darkness.

Then they settled back into the forms of Vera and Chang.

‘I like this body Yama, it suits me.’ Vera said.

‘You look quite enchanting in it, my dear Maya.’

Chapter 4 Right Action

Vajrasana: 29/09/2645 20:18

‘Transition in five seconds, evasive manoeuvres now!’ Deepa cried out.

‘Initiating.’ Chopra replied his fingers dancing over the input array as Bijlirani rolled to the left and banked in a steep curve down cutting across the path of the attacking craft who surged ahead before swinging round again on to our tail. But as they did so we hit transition and the attackers were left chasing empty space.

Uravashi had calculated a jump which would take us in directly to the border of the Madhyadesha, the “Central Region” and we waited tensely to emerge into normal space again.

‘Isn’t this risky, doing hyperspace jumps in an enclosed environment like this?’ I asked.

Deepa shook her head, ‘Risky but essential, its a calculated risk, we have to get within the range of the defensive shields of Madhyadesha. What’s more it seems that the pursuing craft don’t have Bose drives, so we have a few aces up our sleeves.’

Champa was staring abstractedly into space as we waited to emerge from the jump, as if waiting to put through a call.

‘I’ll contact base as we come out of hyperspace.’ She said in a distracted tone. ‘We don’t want to be attacked as incoming hostile traffic, and although I have warned them of our immanent arrival they will need confirmation of our status before they let us through the deflector shields and into Madhyadesha airspace.’

When we emerged into normal space the ship jolted and bucked under us as Rom rolled it to evade beams of fire from defensive systems activated by our appearance.

‘Contact established, cleared for entry.’ Champa cried out.

The beams of fire stopped as Champa spoke and we saw the deflector field fade in front of us and allow us enough time to coast in over the border of Madhyadesha before it returned to active status.

Chopra wiped his brow, ‘Are we in then?’

Uravashi smiled, 'Inside the area specified by Champa as safe, yes.'

'Champa,' Gopika said in a pointed tone, 'You told us no playing around but you are playing games with the language of these people "Contact established, cleared for entry", is that how Yakshis speak?'

Radhika nodded, 'What about "Hi honey, I'm home"? instead?'

Deepa glared at the Yakshis, 'Don't you people ever stop messing around?'

Champa grinned, 'Nope, we're Yakshis.'

Chopra asked, 'Is everybody here like you guys?'

Radhika shook her head and whispered something in Chopra's ear.

We never got to hear the outcome of that exchange as our attention was caught by two phenomena at once. First, the beauty of the landscape we were flying over, a broad river valley that stretched from hills in the South to the foothills of the spindle mountains in the North; second a sudden burst of radiance on the bridge which dazzled our eyes for a moment.

'Nice, flashy entrance Guptaji!' Gopika giggled.

Our flight deck visitor glared at Gopika, he obviously wasn't amused by Yakshi humour. He didn't look or sound so humorous himself either. His image was that of tall dark shiny headed clean shaven figure dressed in a white wrap around garment.

'My name is Mr Chitragupta.' He said pointedly staring at Gopika. 'You Yakshis have been away too long if you think that you can carry on this way. I have a pile of files a mile high on my desk due to your recent antics.' Then all at once he stopped bantering the Yakshis and said in a formal tone.

'Welcome to Madhyadesha, the centre of the universe as we like to think of it. I am here to help guide you to the ship yards and lead you through the entry procedures. We hope you will enjoy your stay with us. Thank you for choosing Vajrasana, largest space port in the great vehicle.'

I looked over at Deepa and shrugged and held up my hands in incomprehension, if the Yakshis were hard to take at times what was with this guy who slipped from "harassed official" to "formal speak" between utterances.

Champa saw my expression and lent over and whispered in my ear.

'Don't say anything out loud about him, he hears everything everybody says about him in the whole universe, all the time, and he

is simultaneously in all places.’ She dropped her voice to an almost imperceptible husky whisper.

‘I think it gets to him some time.’

‘I heard that Champa.’ Chitragupta snapped, ‘And it does get a bit hectic at times, I admit. That’s why we have had to set up procedures for things now. We pride ourselves on quality control now on the great vehicle. “Not just the great vehicle, but a better vehicle too” is the current mantra in Vajrasana, you’ll see things have changed a lot.’

‘Doesn’t sound like your mantras have improved much to me.’ Champa said. Then in one of her serious moments she added, ‘Okay lets cut the small talk, we had better work out what to do when we land.’ She and Deepa went into a huddle with Chitragupta and began discussing how we would be able to process our application to land and make arrangements to re-supply Bijlirani.

Gopika pointed to the forward view screen as we passed a great curve in the river. The water was glittering like the crescent moon.

‘Look Chandra, see how the river curves like a bow here and there is a great city of gleaming spires on the outer shore of the curve?’

‘Yes, what are all those towers, markets and mansions I can see?’

She laughed, ‘Kashi, city of light, the greatest city in the central lands, spices, cloth and precious metals from all over the vehicle come here to be traded in the markets and the finest muslin and silk cloths are made here and shipped to every centre in the great vehicle.’

‘What about that forest area to the North of the city with its great shining stupas and temples?’

‘My, my, are you from the country or what? Didn’t they teach you anything in school? Silly, that is Isipatana, the place where the sages come down to Madhyadesha to teach. The forest is the great deer park and the monuments mark the places where the blessed ones have given the teachings and turned the wheel of Dharma.’

She looked quizzically at me and shook her head. ‘And you think we are the silly ones?’

Bijlirani turned and swept inland and gradually the landscape below us changed from the wide plains of the river valley to an upland plateau punctuated with isolated rocky volcanic peaks.

The peaks were nestled in verdant forests and here and there in clearings we could see paddy fields and villages. We crossed another river, a mile wide gleaming stream and the Yakshis raised a cry.

‘See, its “Golden River”, Home at last, Magadha sweet Magadha.’

We flew on and then Gopika grabbed my shoulder and gestured at a rocky peak on the banks of another river.

‘Look Chandra, see that peak over there, that is Gaya Head, where the Blessed One gave the teaching on how the senses are burning with fire.’

Radhika broke in, ‘Down there by the river can you see the temple?’

I looked down, a lofty white marble temple stood on a wide flight of steps that led down to the river’s edge.

‘The temple by the shore?’

‘Yes that’s Vishnupada, Lord Vishnu landed here and his feet rested on this spot and to this day the land sleeps in peace due to his footprints being here.’

She stared in my eyes, ‘In this land Buddhas, gods, spirits and men lived as one, we kept no sense of separation, until that is...’ She stopped and seemed to choke on her words. ‘Until the troubles began.’

Preeti held her hand and said.

‘Friends, we are approaching Vajrasana, look see how the countless spires and ship yards cover the landscape all around.’

She was not joking. As far as the eye could see the great city stretched in all directions, we flew in from the North and as we went we saw every inch of land covered in a tangled web of skyscraper buildings, towers, pylons, space ships and gantries. For all the world it looked like the graviton pulse emitters and plasma conduits of a starship black hole drive array, only instead of hanging in the infinite depths of space it glittered in the morning sun of the central lands.

Chitragupta and Champa’s conversation was getting heated.

‘Seventy five, and that’s my last offer,’ Chitragupta said in a decisive manner.

‘We are poor Yakshis, friend scribe of the gods, how can we afford that, take twenty, it is all we have.’

‘Twenty!’ Chitragupta laughed, ‘I cannot even process your application for that. Okay you are my friends so give me fifty and we can be done with this.’

‘Twenty five then Gupta dear, and ten for a contribution to the redevelopment of the writers guild centre.’

‘So you are offering me thirty-five?’

‘Yes thirty-five and remember ten goes to your guild.’

‘Done, it is agreed then.’ Chitragupta said, ‘You will land at Pacchetti Port and complete formalities there.’

So saying he said ‘Bye.’ and dematerialised without so much as a further word.

Champa sighed. ‘He’s always like that, all smiles until you pay up and then he’s off without so much as a by your leave.’

‘How will we pay this “thirty-five” rupees? Is that it?’

‘Rupees?’ Champa said, ‘no, no, we use ordinary Takka and Pai here, no foreign rupees or cowries or anything else you have are negotiable in Madhyadesha.’

Deepa frowned and looked bemused.

‘Deepa,’ Champa said, ‘We are happy to pay the duties for your landing taxes as a very small recompense for rescuing us, and also because you have no accounts here it will make things easier.’

‘Champa, that is very kind but if there is something to pay, I want to pay for it.’

‘I won’t take a Takka from you Deepa, worry not Deepa, I will make sure that everybody gets a fair deal. Besides, I have already paid. The sum was debited from the Yakshi guild to the Writers guild when the deal was done, its a done deal.’

Chopra had brought Bijlirani down to a slow pace and was following instructions from flight control that were being relayed via a small remote relay unit that had manifested, transported if you will, onto the bridge. It looked at one moment like a small robot and at another like an elf. It sparked occasionally as well.

‘Give it a thump Mr Chopra,’ Radhika called out to him. ‘Its cultural context interface is on the blink, it can’t decide if you want to see it as a machine or a sprite and its tying its processors in knots.’

Chopra winked at Radhika, ‘I know, I worked out a while ago that it kept trying to change to appear to be something familiar and I think I have figured out how to keep it on the hop.’ He stared at it hard and for an instant and it turned into a miniature image of Radhika.

‘Hey, stop that Chopra,’ Radhika said and thumped the relay unit which turned into a glowing golden orb.

‘There, that will teach you Chopra, its gone into back up mode, most entities find a golden globe fairly comprehensible. Now stop fooling

around with all the knobs and switches on our equipment and standby for instructions on where to land.’

The relay back up mode switched to giving information as machine code and as Rom found this easiest to process he interfaced with the relay and guided the ship down. Later I noticed the probe was gradually taking on the appearance of a glittering silver and chrome robot, apparently Rom found that appearance easy on the eye.

Not that I had much time to spend looking at events on the flight deck as the sight around the ship demanded my attention. Pacchetti Port was near the river and stretched from the palm groves on its shore to the rice paddies that lined a stream which flowed parallel to the river about a kilometre in from the river’s edge. A great suspension bridge linked the far shore of the river to Pacchetti Port and a constant stream of ground craft traffic was coursing back and forward across the bridge. The ship descended onto a launch pad between gantries and ground support facilities that was one of five grouped around a central square. It was the same arrangement as the shipyards we had seen on Tau Ceti III and at the Portal. Seemed that once these people got an idea into their heads they didn’t like to innovate much, if at all.

I went back to the living quarters to check on Cindy who I hoped had slept through the journey. Although I was surprised that all of the jolting and shaking as we had threaded our way through enemy fire had not awoken her. I had half expected her to come onto the bridge at any moment. What I had not expected was that she would not be in the cabin at all.

‘Rom, Chandra here, can you do a check on Cindy for me and locate her on the ship.’ I paged Rom over the comm link.

‘Negative, Dr Chandra, Cindy is not on Bijlirani.’

‘What! When did she leave the ship? Has she gone ashore already?’

‘Dr Chandra, I will check and determine when she left her cabin.’

I strode out of the living quarters and rushed down to the exit ramp and ran out onto the surrounding platform round the ship. I stared all around hoping to see her walking around, perhaps she was disorientated and had wandered off not realising that we were in Madhyadesha and not back home.

‘Dr Chandra, please come to the bridge immediately.’ Rom’s voice came over the comm link.

I ran up the ramp my feet pounding on the deck as I bounded down the corridor and up to the bridge. When I got there a strange hush overshadowed everybody.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Chandra,’ Deepa said walking towards me, ‘Cindy is not on the ship.’

‘I know she must have gone ashore already.’

Champa shook her head, ‘Dr Chandra, Rom’s sensor logs reveal she left the ship just after we entered Madhyadesha airspace.’

I stopped dead in my tracks. ‘How is that possible? We were flying at supersonic speeds at an altitude of thirty thousand feet, how could she have left?’

‘We’d like to know too,’ Champa said.

‘Could she have been transported off?’ I asked.

Champa shrugged, ‘That is a possibility, but I can’t understand why anybody would have done that inside Madhyadesha airspace, it would make more sense if some hostile force had somehow managed to do that in enemy space.’

Deepa said, ‘Do you remember anything Chandra that she said that might relate to her disappearance?’

I sat down on a couch by a console and lent my elbows on my knees and cradled my head in my hands thinking hard trying to remember anything that might be helpful.

I looked up, ‘No I can’t remember anything in particular. The last thing I can remember her saying was “I’m so glad to be out of the Portal Chandra.”. Then she just closed her eyes and seemed to go to sleep.

Everybody looked glum at this. Then something came to me.

‘But there was one odd thing, it came to me after I had left the cabin, I realised that she had green eyes, but, its funny I don’t remember her having green eyes.’

‘Green Eyes!’ Champa jolted and stared at me as if I was some kind of an idiot while Radhika and Menaka looked in horror at each other and then jumped up and started staring into all our eyes.

‘What’s so special about green eyes?’ I asked.

‘Oh Chandra, Chandra, Cindy was never on this ship, only gods have green eyes in the great vehicle, Chandra, a god was on this ship in the form of Cindy. Hitched a ride like us, the question is who was

it, and why did they jump ship inside the border of Madhyadesha. I don't like the sound of this.'

'How come a god couldn't get out of the portal under their own steam?' Chopra asked.

Champa frowned. 'Well the portal exits are under the control of the gods and one god can stop another sometimes. No, she must have wanted to slip in unnoticed, and that is what is troubling. Why did she not say who she was? Who was she?'

'Or He,' Radhika added.

'Damn,' Champa said, 'The authorities will have to be notified and we are going to be held up here during the enquiry, this is not good.'

So with this rather solemn turn to the proceedings we made our way off the ship and down to the central plaza and into one of the offices that lined the square. Unlike our previous visits to such squares this one was bustling with life and all the offices and shops had brightly decorated frontages and signs. We trooped up to an office which seemed to me to be clearly marked in Hindi "Prevesha patra niyantrana kendra", I blinked and looked again in astonishment, it now said "Entry Permit Control Centre". Radhika nudged me in the ribs and said, 'Neat eh? Signs which translate themselves in real time into the language of the observer.'

Hinglaj Devi Temple: 30/09/2645 10:48

The wind blowing in from the desert hinterland whistled though the sand dunes and over the salt flats of the marsh lands by the sea shore.

The temple of Hinglaj Devi stood in a narrow canyon that was in the cleft of a range of low hills that was set back from the shore. Even standing on a nearby rocky crag you could see in its central courtyard at its heart the great pool of mercury that marked its central sanctuary.

If you had been standing on the crag you would also have seen a figure flicker and come into focus on the crag. But you would not have wanted to probably. Not unless you were a devotee of the goddess Durga, and didn't mind being near lions.

'Nice to be home isn't it boy?' She said stroking the mane on her lion that she was seated on the back of.

She dismounted and stared down at the temple. Where she stood the rock began to smoke and glow with the energy emanating from her

feet which ate into the ancient granite and began to melt it as if it were butter.

‘Such a nice temple, I’ve always liked this temple of mine dearly.’ She shook her head, ‘not that I have seen many temples recently since I got trapped in that ridiculous portal thing during this spat between the spoilt boy brats who call themselves gods these days.’ She patted her mounts mane again and whispered in his ear.

‘But now we’re back, boy, and it’s time to remind then it doesn’t pay to forget the goddess.’

She looked up at the moon in the sky.

‘Nine nights to shake the world, that’s all it will take. So let’s begin.’

In an instant she was gone from Hinglaj.

The only sign that she had been there was the still smouldering impression of her feet left in the rock surface of the crag.

Vajrasana: 30/09/2645 20:18

Inspector Bhairava looked up when the door to his office opened.

‘Namaste Champa, and this must be...’ he glanced down at his information pool. ‘District Magistrate Deepa Bharati, I recognise you from your entry permit image.’

He stood up and motioned towards two chairs on the opposite side of his desk from his. ‘Please sit down, we have much to talk about.’

We all sat down.

‘Deepa, may I call you that?’

I nodded.

‘My name is Bhairava, Kotwal, or Inspector in English, Bhairava. It seems we have much in common, I am the Kotwal of Vajrasana, you are the District Magistrate of Bodh Gaya. We share a common interest in law and order. What a pity that we have to meet under these circumstances.’

‘Inspector, may I call you that? Bhairava, I regret too being here under these circumstances, I seek aid in tracking down a suspect who I pursued into the portal and I am hoping that you can extend aid to me in this.’ I said, hoping that there was some chance I might get a lead on tracking down Chang and his crew here on the great vehicle.

‘Unfortunately Deepa, your case and mine may conflict. My first priority must be to investigate what goddess or god slipped into

Madhyadesha with you and to locate them and ensure that they are not hostile to the interests of the thirty-three.’

‘Perhaps Inspector Bhairava our interests may coincide, I suspect that tracking down my suspects, General Chang and his crew may overlap with tracking down the identity who hitched a ride with us to this place.’

‘I hope so Madam, but what concerns me first are a number of inconsistencies in your statement.’

‘What inconsistencies?’

‘In the account of your journey here which you gave to Constable Ganesha at the Entry check you spoke of five ships entering the portal, is that not correct?’

‘Yes, our ship, General Chang’s ship, the Chinese ship Wu-Tai Pagoda, the Tibetan ship Sechen Gompa and the Singhalese ship Mahavihar.’

Inspector Bhairava shook his head, ‘Then where are the last three ships you mentioned? Only two ships, yours and a FB 16-B craft came through the portal.’

‘Could they still be in the portal?’ I asked, astonished to hear they had not come through yet.

‘Unlikely unless the crews were hopeless reprobates and utterly failed to attain any of the perfections.’

‘I doubt that they were Monastery ships, the crews were all highly realised monks from the Pure Land, Vajrayana and Theravada traditions.’

‘Ah ha, now I begin to see a little light, highly realised monks you say?’

‘Yes, all monks, I think most were... quite... highly realised.’

‘Well that’s settled then, no problem on that score that is a relief.’

I looked in astonishment at him, ‘Settled is it? Why is that so?’

Champa grinned, ‘Monks and their ships would not have exited on this level, they would have gone straight up to the next level.’

‘The next level?’

‘Yes the level of the 33, their heaven you might call it, the next deck in the ship.’ Inspector Bhairava added as if the matter was closed.

‘Can I have a drink of water please?’ I said feeling faint.

‘Certainly.’ He called out through a side door to the chamber.

‘Constable Kartikkeya, bring in some refreshments for our guests.’

Inspector Bhairava got up and got some water from a long necked clay pot which he poured into a glass bowl and handed to me. It was cool and sweet and refreshed me delightfully. It gave me the courage to ask.

‘You said “the next deck” when we entered this place we were told this was the great vehicle of the Buddhas, but we didn’t realise it had more than one deck, how many are there?’

‘Oh dear, didn’t you know? There are seven of course,’ broke in Champa.

I shook my head and felt a sense of distress sweep through me again.

‘Do you mean Chang could be on any of the seven levels, and they are all this big? How am I ever going to find him?’

‘No, no dear Deepa,’ Inspector Bhairava replied seeing the look of concern in my eyes. ‘It is most unlikely that he is on the power plant deck below this deck, the conditions there are very hot and tiresome and it is avoided by almost all but those who are wedded to suffering. Nor yet is he likely to be on any of the top four decks which are reserved for higher life forms. No, he will almost certainly be on either this deck or on the deck above, the deck of the 33 gods.’

‘So was Chang’s ship followed?’

‘Yes Deepa it was, but not by our forces, it was intercepted and destroyed by a patrol of the Mara faction, if Chang still lives then he and his crew are prisoners of Mara.’

‘Where does Mara have its base?’

Inspector Bhairava offered me a cup of tea and some fried fritters as he said.

‘The location of Mara’s base is not known, if it was we would attack it, but we think that it is in the heaven of the 33 somewhere, probably disguised as something other than it is.’

I smiled, now I had something to go on.

‘So I want to take Bijlirani to the heaven of the 33 and pursue him there. How do I get there?’

Chuckling Bhairava picked up one of the sweets on his plate and popped it into his mouth and said.

‘Um, my dear Lady, that is out of the question, you cannot fly a ship to the heaven of the 33, it is far too dangerous to pass through the entry portals in the present climate of strife between the gods.’

‘So how can I get to this heaven of the 33?’

‘You will have to walk in over the border, that is the only way you can do it without attracting attention from the wrong eyes.’

‘Walk to heaven?’ I said looking up at the ceiling and wondering how he was proposing I walk in the sky. Like a bird walking in the air, leaving no footprints behind in space?

Champa put down the plate of twirly-wirly type orange sweets she was eating and with sugary syrup dripping from her fingers said sweetly.

‘Deepa, we will have to climb the spindle mountains to get to the heaven of the 33, our agents have paths and ways of getting over the border without the guards knowing we are coming and going.’

I was worried by one thing she had said above all, ‘Champa why do you say “we” you don’t need to put yourself out by coming with us, we can find the way on our own I am sure.’

Champa and Bhairava both seemed to stifle a laugh together and half choke on the tit-bits they were happily munching on.

‘Wah! Such brave words.’ Inspector Bhairava said, ‘You are a woman after my own heart. But, you are ill-informed. You cannot cross the border on your own, the way is hard and the Asura border patrols will pick you off the moment you approach the border.’

‘Deepa,’ Champa said suddenly sounding like professional speaking about their vocation, ‘We will have to accompany you or you will most certainly perish. What’s more my Dakini sisters who live in the mountains know the ways of the hills and vales better than any Asura soldier ever did. But, they won’t help you unless we accompany you to introduce you to them, in fact they will probably take you as Asura spies or provocateurs and kill you without a second thought, so if the Asuras don’t kill you the Dakinis will.’

Bhairava coughed, ‘But in fact before you can do any of that there is the matter of the missing deity from your ship. I must insist you stay in Vajrasana for the moment until we make progress in identifying the deity concerned in case we need your assistance in any way in our enquiries.’

I had been a DM long enough to know this was a polite way to say we could not leave as long as we might be needed to “help the police with their enquiries” as they used to say.

I and Champa left the police headquarters, a pleasant cream coloured pavilion by a lotus pond in a palm grove between Pacchetti Port and

the city centre. We stood on the overhead travelator that ran at the height of the palm tree tops and watched the freight traffic and individual ground cars on the highway below surging silently along.

‘Let’s go to the main temple and offer lamps to the Buddha to give thanks for our safe passage to Vajrasana.’ Champa said and grabbing my hand pulled me over onto the opposite direction travelator. I shrugged and acquiesced by my silence to her suggestion. I reckoned I needed some time to digest the downpour of information that was overloading my mind.

The palm groves and pavilions began to be replaced by high rise buildings as we went down the way. But I noticed that the roof of each building had groves and gardens on their roof. So there was no loss of greenery and the air was cooled by the pleasant breeze wafting through the green canopy above our heads. As we approached a great ring shaped wall of skyscrapers Champa pulled me off the pathway again and into the doorway of an emporium in one of the blocks.

‘One moment Deepa, we need some new clothes to visit the temple in, I don’t want to go in this green camouflage suit and you are still wearing your uniform as well.’ Champa said gesturing at her gorgeous green outfit, somehow it had never struck me as camouflage.

“Renowned Tailors and Outfitters” the sign said above the store front and when we got inside I saw the entrance led to countless chambers each lined with suits of clothing and dresses in all manner of colours and forms which covered every available inch of wall space.

‘Greetings, my dear Champa where have you been so long?’ Asked a small friendly looking figure who strolled over to us as we looked around.

‘In the out lands Noor-al-Haq.’

He looked us up and down and a broad grin broke across his countenance.

‘That would account for your costumes I imagine, you and your friend are dressed in fashions that would grace the courts of the noble folk of some rural backwater, but now you are here you need something more fitting. What kinds of outfits are you thinking of getting?’

I found myself thinking of the sari from Bhagalavati that I had found myself wearing in the forest grove as he spoke. He glanced over at me and nodded.

‘An excellent choice madam.’

‘What?’ I said looking in bemusement at him, ‘I have not told you yet what kind of clothes I want.’

Champa grinned as another figure came bustling up bearing two bags in his hands.

‘Yes you have Deepa, Noor can tell you inner thoughts when it comes to your desires in clothing, see here comes Hameed with the clothes you and I imagined when Noor spoke to us.’

I opened the bag and looked in at the contents with astonishment. It was the red sari, and all the other decorations and garments, bodice and petticoats, that went with it.

‘Come on Deepa, lets change into our new outfits.’ She peeked into the bag I was carrying and smiled at me.

‘A lovely choice, you will look divine.’

‘Here is the Salwar Kameez and Dupatta you imagined, Champa.’ Hameed said handing her the second bag.

So it was a few minutes later we came out of the emporium, I dressed in a sumptuous red silk sari and Champa in a modest wheaten and flaxen patterned trouser suit with a long scarf which was decorated in a tie dye design of red and green dots on a ochre background.

As we emerged from the ring of skyscrapers into the central plaza I saw the temple for the first time. I gasped.

‘Champa, what is this place?’

‘Deepa, its the great temple that marks the spot of the Buddhas’ enlightenment, surely you know that?’

I blinked and looked again, ‘Its the Mahabodhi temple, its in Bodh Gaya not here.’

Champa chuckled, ‘Not quite Deepa, the Mahabodhi temple is in all the Bodh Gayas but the greatest Mahabodhi temple is here in Vajrasana.’

I realised then that just as all the space ports of the Previous Buddhas were on the same design so they had made all of their temples on the same design. It was at that moment that the veil dropped from eyes. Everything here was like a transmuted and transformed version of

what I had seen in Bodh Gaya back on earth. Only here it was as if everything was the archetype on which the terrestrial version was based.

‘How tall is the temple?’ I asked gazing in awe at the vast structure that confronted me.

‘Just over five hundred of your feet high Deepa. See how it towers over the other spires of temples that cluster round it like hibiscus petals in a bloom around the central stamen.’

‘Its beautiful,’ I said lost for words. The great spire of the temple was covered in complex mouldings and sculptures that ran in repeating patterns up its four sides. The closer you looked the more complex the patterns became. Like a pattern that repeats in a pattern I realised that it was covered in countless images of the temple itself, each I suspected covered in yet more images of itself. An infinitely regressing progression of images that somehow gave a sense of the temple merging into, and emerging out of infinity into normal space.

‘Watch out Deepa,’ Champa said touching my cheek and turning my face to look at her smile of delight at seeing my astonished expression.

‘Don’t look too close or you might get lost in the designs, they are half in this space and half in hyper space, you might get sucked in and come round and find a hundred years had passed in this time space framework without your knowing.’

We stopped at a wayside stall on the plaza and bought a tray of oil lamps and walked over to the gateway. Like my temple in Bodh Gaya the entrance to the temple compound was on the East side of the temple. Totally unlike my temple this temple was surrounded by miniature versions of itself and countless round topped and finial topped domed stupa type structures like a forest round a central great tree.

Where the Tara temple had stood in Bodh Gaya was a glistening white structure of white translucent crystal that seemed to refract images from all the structures around it into a kind of diamond like glow.

‘Is that the Tara temple?’ I asked Champa.

She nodded, ‘Yes that is the place where the goddess Tara, when she was here stood and stared back at the temple. As she stood there the crag on which stood was transformed into white diamond, like the

energy in the lattices of her probability matrix. To this day the rock stands transfigured into a vast multi-faceted diamond of the first water that reflects images from all around in its depths. Some say that the matrix of the diamond still contains the goddess watching in perpetual wonder the miracle of the spot where the Blessed Ones of this place have gained enlightenment.

She tugged on my hand and said.

‘Come on though we must circumambulate the temple first before we light the lamps.’

So we walked down the steps and she led me round the inner walkway that surrounded the temple and on which countless men and women, spirits and deities, or their emanation forms, were walking.

‘What’s that?’ I asked pointing at a tall smooth grey spire which stood to the left of the main temple.’

‘That spot marks where the birds of paradise circled around the Buddha’s head as he contemplated where to sit and led his attention to the tree.’

We moved on and I saw another great temple standing towards the back of the compound. Around it a great throng of pilgrims was circulating whilst others were bowing and prostrating before it. Others still were garlanding it with flowers and flags as they walked around its enclosure.

‘What’s that temple?’ I asked my voice almost drowned by the chorus of voices, trumpets, harps and drums being played by groups of musicians and dancers performing songs and dramas in honour of the Buddhas.

‘That is the temple of Kashyapa Buddha, the illustrious forerunner of Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha, to honour it brings great merit.’

‘What is gained by honouring Kashyapa Buddha?’

‘It is said that by walking around his temple, the fruit to be gained is the ability to see your past lives and how the fruits of your actions mature as experiences in subsequent lives. Would you walk around the shrine with me?’

I shook my head. ‘Champa, one life is more than enough for me to cope with at the moment, perhaps another time.’

‘Perhaps, another life.’ Champa added with her eyes downcast on the crystal and marble tiles our naked feet were walking on. The feel of the marble was cool and smooth under my feet but then I started

noticing little lumpy bits which lay on the ground here and there and stuck to the soles of my feet.

‘Hmm, what are these Champa?’ I said picking up a tiny fruit, a bit like a berry and holding it between my finger tips.

‘The fruits of the Bodhi tree, a kind of fig if you will, they fall in this season.’

She clasped my hand and made me hold the fruit in my hand and close my fingers around it.

‘Take this fruit with you Deepa, one day you will return to Hindustan and you can plant its seeds in your own garden and grow a sapling from the True Bodhi Tree there.’

I thought of my garden in the freshness of dawn, the Orchids amidst the Hibiscus bushes lit by the light of the sun rising over the Kholagiri hills. I smiled and took the fruit and put it into a little space in one of the broaches I was wearing.

‘But, don’t forget to dry it out before it rots in your broach darling, or you will never manage to grow a tree from the seed.’ I didn’t forget.

We had come round now to the West side of the temple and there I saw the Bodhi tree. It was a lofty tree with a stout trunk and seven main boughs that branched above head height into a flowing green canopy above our heads. It was wrapped around with garlands of flowers and flags, even strings of pearls it seemed to me. The air was heady with the scent of incense, sandal wood and aloe, jasmine and rose.

To its North groups of ochre and red robed monks and nuns knelt with their right knees bent and palms joined in adoration and chanted stanzas of protective verses. On the South groups of lay people, some dressed in white, others in grey or blue, some in bright colours like myself, sat or kneeled and chanted or just sat rapt in contemplation of the tree and the structure at its base.

The central wonder of Vajrasana, the Diamond Throne itself. I was almost disappointed for at first glance it looked like nothing so much as a slab of the translucent grey building material of all the first Buddha artefacts. But then as I looked again I saw that its translucent surface was somehow different, the fine polish seemed as if skimmed over a heart which was somehow there, but not there.

‘You see Deepa?’ Champa asked as we sank down and sat cross legged and sitting in a comfortable posture, ‘The Diamond Throne, it is a block of the pure primal substance of the universe itself, the substrate out of which the phenomenal world itself springs. Nobody knows how the First Buddhas created these things, gods and men, even later Buddhas, cannot fathom all the works of the First Buddhas. It is said that this block was brought from the Home World after the fall by the First Buddhas.’

‘Then this is not the original home of the First Buddhas?’

Champa shook her head. ‘This is all that remains of Home World.’

‘Where is the Home world?’

I saw Champa’s eyes moisten and a tear begin to well from the corner of her eye.

‘Nowhere Deepa, the first Buddha’s Home World perished in the dawn of time.’

‘What destroyed it?’

‘They did.’

‘Why? How?’

‘I cannot sing the whole ballad for you, but in essence...’ I reached over and wiped the tear from Champa’s cheek that was rolling down her face and she continued.

‘Thus have I heard, at the beginning of time the first Buddhas evolved within the primal mass of stellar gases in the centre of the universe. They attained consciousness, some say their very nature was pure luminous consciousness to begin with, and gradually they transformed their environment from a stellar gas cloud into a world. Time passed and they separated into individual identities and took on physical form as they explored the world their thoughts created. It is not easy to understand, were each of them individual beings, individual worlds, individual universes, none knows the answers to these questions. Some became men and women, and some assumed the forms of spirits and gods and goddesses. But as time passed the story is that their world become like that of men, they learned agriculture, the arts and crafts and built material civilisations. In time they realised the need for systems of governance and two groups appeared. One favoured a system of electing a great representative who would co-ordinate the affairs of the world, another faction favoured the notion of granting power to an absolute authority who

would run the world. The seed of this dispute matured and as their rancour developed they turned to more and more ways of disputing with each other, words turned to blows, fists to fights. They built weapons of war to try and bring the struggle to resolution. Some turned to the path of technology and began building machines of war, guns, bombs and finally nuclear and fusion weapons and weapons the very nature of which defies imagination. In particular the scientist monks found out how to manipulate the very substrate of phenomenal reality. Then discovered the primal energy which when it manifests in this world takes the form of an energy which has a distinctive green glow to it. Eventually it became clear to the followers of the great representative faction that the Home World would immanently be destroyed in a holocaust due to misuse of this knowledge by the faction of the World Rulers. The monks conferred on what to do. Some of the first Buddhas favoured some kind of peace treaty. Others said that no compromise was possible. Meanwhile the gods faction evolved a technology to transform themselves into quantum probabilities of energy and matter and left the home worlds in the form of a wave of energy passing out into the then empty depths of space. The First Buddhas fought in the ultimate conflict at the dawn of time. The Great Representative faction had built this ship, the great vehicle, as an escape vessel and when the time came they left the home worlds and came onto the vehicle.

The War amongst the First Buddhas reached its inevitable conclusion soon after. The manipulation of the substrate of reality was such that the entire universe imploded and exploded. It destroyed all of the First Buddha's original Home World and left instead a legacy that you see all around us.'

'What legacy is that? The great vehicle?' I asked in awe thinking of the great vehicle and the incredible technologies which had built it.

'The whole universe is but the afterglow of the primal moment of destruction and creation that you call the big bang, that the First Buddhas know as the war at the dawn of time. It was the greatest renunciation ever known. They allowed their worlds to be destroyed and went into exile so that all might find a way to existence, and the end of existence. There is one last wonder you should know too Deepa.'

'What could that be?'

‘The entire development and destruction of the First Buddhas took place in the first fraction of a nanosecond at the dawn of time. For the First Buddhas time is but a dimension that they move in like space is to us. They transcend time and space and some say that they walk amongst us unseen as they have done since time began. Now look into the Diamond Throne, look into it deeply and you will see that it is a window into that which is beyond time and space, beyond seer and seen. It is a fragment of the primordial Buddha nature itself.’

I stared at and into the Diamond Throne and as I did so I began to experience what Champa has spoken of. An experience beyond words, an experience you have to make your own to understand in any way at all.

Champa snapped her fingers, ‘Now let us light the lamps.’

We moved to an area further away from the Bodhi Tree and the Temple and arranged out lamps around a circular platform and I took an incense stick and wrapping cloth round its end and dipping it in clarified butter made a kind of torch. I lit twenty seven lamps while contemplating those of us who had been fortunate to make it so far on the journey, and those we had lost along the way.

Dusk was falling as we left the temple compound and made our way back to the ship. Chandra was sitting disconsolately in the ship cafeteria staring into a cup of coffee when I walked in. He smiled meekly at me but perked up as I told him of what had happened on my visit to Inspector Bhairava and at the temple. I told him too of the tale that Champa had told me of the story of the First Buddhas.

He sighed when I finished my story and said.

‘Seems that even in amongst all of this we walk amidst still its the same. Nothing can be found which is free of suffering, which is permanent or that has any essential essence to it.’

I put my hand over his as it rested on the table and said.

‘Sleep on it Chandra, let’s see what the morning brings.’

It turned out I should have said, ‘Let’s see what the night brings.’

Sixty-four Yogini Temple: 10/01/2645 23:01

Lightning crashed from the storm clouds towering like anvils over the hills and valleys that seemed to try and hide from the fury of the storm. Torrents of rain fell from the heavens and mixing with the forest streams poured into the mighty Narmada river. The river itself

rashly left behind the upland plateau and attempted to force its way with its raging waters between walls of marble and granite.

Deep in the gorge the river raged and fought an endless battle with rock which it knew that with patience it would in future ages win, as long as the rains fed its sources in the highlands of the central lands.

High above the battle raging in the ravine was perched the shrine of the Sixty-four Yogini. A flash of lightning illuminated the round structure with its gallery of statues around the inner wall of the circle. Sixty-four strange images lined the sanctum. Goddesses one and all, Yoginis one and all, all at once the same yet different. Some with lovely human faces, some with faces contorted in strange forms expressing horror and anger. Some faces not so human, some animal and some divine. Their mounts were many and diverse, animals of all sorts, known and mythical in appearance, human and divine figures also had their place at the feet of the goddesses.

Another lightning bolt struck, this time in the centre of the courtyard. This time as the light faded a golden green glow filled the temple. Durga prowled the enclosure on her lion. Her face was lit from below by a fiery glow seeming to emanate from her spectral mount. In the glow her breath was like your breath seen in cold morning air on a winter's day in the mountains. Only her breath held in it the power of life and death and as she breathed on the images her life breath entered into the stone statues.

‘Sisters! Awake, the time to sleep is over, tonight you ride with the wind over this wide land beyond the borders of Madhyadesha the brats are squabbling over what is rightfully our portion of the sacrifice. We must drive the scum from the surface of the ghee, our fire must purify the land from its impurities.’

The figures stirred and gazed in adoration at the queen of the gods herself. Long had it rancoured with them that none of the first gods had been women of any note. Men, just men, Indra, Varuna, Agni, Sakka, Brahma, not a woman amongst them. But when they needed help to defeat the Buffalo Demon, they had come and clung to the skirts of the great goddess and begged for release from their own folly.

‘They shall feel my wrath!’ Cried Shitala, goddess of smallpox.

‘They shall feel my grip!’ Cried Hariti, goddess of childbirth.

‘They shall ignore me at their peril!’ Cried a goddess whose name it is better not to mention, suffice it to say that black was the colour of her complexion.

A goddess without a head at all on her shoulders, only one she carried in her hands said nothing, but the sense of menace in her very existence spoke amply of what she intended now she was awakened.

‘Sisters!’ Durga hushed them as she waved her great lance in a circle around her head. ‘Nine nights to conquer the seven worlds? Is this too much to ask? Does it not leave us two nights to party on, to feast on the spoils and celebrate our victory?’

Durga laughed. ‘Make no mistake it is more than enough to establish the order as it should be.’

The Yogini goddesses surged up into the air on their mounts waiting for the word from Durga who began to raise her great sword into the air.

‘Sisters, one word, one thing has changed in this cosmos since we last walked this land. In so much as we remember and honour the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha so to we now revile and reject the works of Yama and his consort Maya who are now our sworn enemies as they have opposed the Dharma.’

She gestured at a garland of heads which she had hung around her pale golden neck. ‘I would have the head of Yama and Maya for decorations to complete my necklace by the time nine nights have passed.’

She growled and her lion roared.

‘And you wouldn’t want not to please me, now would you?’

As her sword fell through the air the sound was as if a thunderclap of unimaginable intensity cleft the air, the very fabric of space and time shook. The Sixty-four Yoginis surged outwards from the temple boundary. A tide engulfing all in its path, a meteor storm smashing through the air in a luminous display of fire and rolling thunder.

Lightning flashed again, the temple was empty, Durga was gone, no goddesses lined its walls. Nobody was home. But where sweat had fallen from Durga’s brow as she exerted herself urging on the goddesses the ground smoked and gradually melted as the sweat drops sank down endlessly into the earth.

Vajrasana: 10/01/2645 20:18

‘Wake up Chandra.’

I looked up and saw Deepa looking distractedly down at me, her brown eyes still heavy with sleep but with a wild look as if she had seen something which had completely spooked her.

‘What’s up Deepa?’ I said groggily rubbing my eyes and staring around me to see if my cabin was as I had left it, and worried in case the mess it was probably in would upset Deepa’s sensibilities. She was, it seemed, immune to the randomly strewn clothing and piles of papers which seemed to appear instantly on my desk the moment I entered the room. Instead she sat down on the side of the bed and stared at me intently.

‘Didn’t you realise at all it wasn’t Cindy?’

I shook my head, ‘I had no idea, but to be honest I was simply so shocked to find Cindy after believing her dead for two years that I didn’t know what to think.’ I hesitated for a moment and then added, ‘The weird thing is that in a sense it was Cindy, Deepa I can’t explain it but it was Cindy, even if it was some goddess impersonating her.’

Deepa frowned, ‘Well all hell has broken loose it seems, “Cindy” is more than most people bargained for. So come on sleepy head you’ve got to get up and help me make sense of the legacy you and your old girlfriend have bequeathed us.’

I reached out and grabbed Deepa’s hand as she was about to get up.

‘Deepa, she wasn’t my girlfriend, I’d only just met her on Tau Ceti III the day before the expedition into the tunnels. There was nothing between us. It was more that seeing her die so pointlessly changed me.’

Deepa looked into my eyes as if trying to assess the truth of what I was saying.

‘Its okay Chandra you don’t have to explain yourself, don’t worry I won’t hold your past against you.’ She stood up. ‘But if you don’t get a move on I will get riled. Come on.’

I jumped from bed as she got up and threw on a shirt to hide my chest which I had been clutching the sheet over while Deepa sat on the bed. The instant I entered the bridge I understood that something big was up. Rom was monitoring developments and Uravashi was logging events into a data array. I plopped down at my work station and punched up the current data intake from the sensors.

‘What the hell?’ I shook my head in consternation.

‘See Chandra? Seems our visitor has really set the cat amongst the pigeons.’

‘I am reading this data right? Is it reporting over a thousand Asura craft destroyed in the last two hours and a general retreat by the remaining Asura forces towards the heaven of the 33?’

‘That seems to be about it, although some of the details are sketchy at the moment.’ Uravashi said and then punched in some more data and said.

‘That’s it the model is complete. I have set up a set of algorithms to try and classify the event types into sets and it looks as if there are a limited number of classes of events and a pattern to their distribution. Look.’

She projected a map of the habitat disk onto the view screen. Like a Mandala image with a central circle that represented the spindle mountain with the four continents spread out around it in the cardinal directions.

‘Here are the events, our hosts have classified them into three main types: enemy fleets destroyed, bases wiped out, and individual patrols eliminated.’

She overlaid a network of dots onto the main image that formed a dazzling array like the milky way over the map.

‘But now if you plot the events by the time they occurred see how they spread out.’

She took away the points of light again and then added them in again and it was evident that they were all spreading out from Madhyadesha in a kind of pincer movement with one front moving out to the East and another to the West until they met at the Northern Continent opposite to Jumbudvipa, the continent on which Madhyadesha was situated.

‘But you can also do a subset of the data that also plots the events by type of mode of execution, destruction by fire, sonic attack, biological warfare and so on. This way the data looks like this.’

Again she wiped the data off the map and then using colours, red, green, blue, and every colour of the rainbow to distinguish events plotted the way they moved. Now it looked as if the Mandala had been painted over by a team of spray paint artists who had started from Madhyadesha and then flown in looping patterns out over the

other continents and then spiralled in ever decreasing circles towards the central mountains. They had still not it seemed reached the central mountains and were as the data came in apparently involved in mopping up operations on pockets of Asura activity.

‘How many colours are you using to map the events?’ Deepa asked.

‘I have found I have to use sixty-four to account for all the event inheritance types when applied onto a basic object from which all the data sets derive.’

‘Any clue to the source of these events?’ I asked staring at the data, ‘It obvious they originate from Madhyadesha, but where in Madhyadesha?’

‘South of here, near to the relative position of the city of Jabalpur in the Earth version of this area, central India in other words.’ Uravashi said, then Rom broke in.

‘Ms Uravashi, I have some other data to correlate with that it appears. I will overlay it on the display.’

Rom input his data and then we watched the model replay but now the events started with a pattern of sixty-four streaks of light like meteors radiating out from North central India and then beginning their dance of destruction once they crossed the borders of Madhyadesha.

Deepa stared at the data and growled, ‘What kind of fighting units could turn a war which has been stalemated for ages like this around so completely in a single night?’

‘A secret weapon?’ Chopra said, then added, ‘Pity we have no images of the appearance of these military units, or even estimates of the number of troops in each. Who could be deploying such vast forces? They must have committed thousands of troops and massive technological resources to an offensive like this.’

Rom broke in, ‘Madam Deepa, Inspector Bhairava is here and wants to enter the ship with a team of forensic officers, shall I admit him?’

‘Straight away Rom, I’ll go and meet him. Meanwhile see if you can improve those images of the initial deployment of the forces, or whatever it was. Chandra you come with me, Inspector Bhairava will probably have some questions for you I expect.’

Deepa got up and I followed her. Inspector Bhairava was standing inside the entry ramp looking around him at the ship design.

‘Very interesting ship design Deepa, another time I would like to discuss its drive systems with you but now there are more pressing matters.’

He glanced over at me. ‘Dr Chandra a pleasure to meet you, please show us where your visitor slept when she was in the ship, and could you summon Dr Sharma as well Deepa, I may need to hear his testimony.’

‘This was the cabin Cindy, or whoever was impersonating her, stayed in while she was on the ship.’ I said showing Bhairava the door of the cabin I had last seen Cindy in.

‘Has the cabin been touched since she left?’

I looked at Deepa and shrugged.

‘I don’t think so we didn’t think to seal it or anything but I don’t think any of us have been in since I went in on landing and found she was not in the cabin.’

‘Good, very good, will you all please wait here whilst Forensic Officer Savitri and myself investigate the cabin.’

He and a tall woman officer carrying a big black doctor’s bag went into the room and closed the door behind them. We stood around in the corridor for a few moments feeling a bit at a loss. Then Dr Sharma came up and enquired what was happening and could he help. Before he could start to tell us anything the door opened and Inspector Bhairava came out looking as if his suspicions about something had been confirmed, in other words the frown on his face had turned to a smile. He spotted Dr Sharma.

‘Ah Dr Sharma I presume, so glad you have turned up promptly you must take us to your clinic immediately. It is true you gave a tranquilliser shot to the visitor?’

‘Yes, I gave her a standard sedative shot to help her over the shock.’

‘Excellent, this is good news, I don’t suppose you ran any scans?’

Dr Sharma glanced down and then looked up and said, ‘Sadly no, I intended to run a full set of tests in the morning, but the next morning she was already gone it seems. I thought that a sedative was all that was needed.’

‘In can’t be helped, perhaps it is just as well you did not run tests, now I insist to your clinic at once.’

I followed Bhairava, Deepa and Sharma to the clinic and when we got there Bhairava asked.

‘Dr Sharma, how often do you dispose of the sharps bin?’

‘When it gets full, there is no need for a regular disposal schedule on a ship like this normally.’

‘I had thought it might be so, that means the needle you used to inject Cindy with a tranquilliser should still be here, please show me the sharps bin.’

Sharma pointed at the bin and Bhairava erected a containment field on a work surface and as we watched as he emptied the bins contents into field. Then he picked up a set of manipulator tools from his bag and begin to gingerly pick through the contents of the sharps bin, carefully avoiding all contact with the contents by manipulating them inside the containment field only. Suddenly he said, ‘Ah ha, I believe we have the item in question here.’

He separated one syringe from the rest and laid it carefully onto an area of the base of the containment field where there was nothing else. I looked over at it and said.

‘That’s odd the end of the needle seems to have melted away, what a pity it might have had some evidence in it if it had not been destroyed.’

Inspector Bhairava looked at me and said.

‘Luckily for you your knowledge of gods and goddesses is singularly lacking, if it had not been so I doubt you would have survived your encounter. Also you are quite wrong in presuming that the lack of a needle tip will hamper the identification. Now we know it was indeed a goddess we can do a scan to determine the probability matrix and confirm my hypothesis.’

He collapsed the containment field and placed it and its contents into a protective chamber one of his officers was carrying.

‘Now let us return to the cabin and I will show you how we know your visitor was partly goddess and partly human.’

‘Partly human?’ I asked.

‘Yes remarkably it seems that humans from your Buddha field seem to have the ability to bear the presence of goddesses, and I suspect gods, within your bodies and still be not totally destroyed by the experience. It is possible that after being possessed by a deity upon the departure of a deity the original human identity might in some senses still exist, but I suspect be somewhat altered by the experience.’

A peculiarity of your Buddha field that might be worthy of note in some erudite journal perhaps I feel.'

We had reached the door to the cabin that Cindy had occupied and the officers standing by the door saluted as Inspector Bhairava told them they could go now and then took us into the cabin. Officer Savitri was standing by the side of a large containment field which had been erected around the bunk where I had laid Cindy down to sleep. The containment field was blanked out and I could see nothing of the bunk.

'Dr Chandra, you are a very lucky man indeed, the Great Goddess rarely shows such compassion to her devotees, behold the effect her touch normally has.' So saying he changed the polarity of the field from blanked off to transparent. To begin with I couldn't make head or tail of what I saw. The sheets and blankets were burnt away and even the mattress and the bunk base seemed to have been eaten away by some fiery acidic substance. Then I saw the burn marks were in the right proportions to represent the shape of a sleeping person.

'Why?' Was all I could ask.

'Dr Chandra, the manner in which certain of the gods manage their energy matter matrix phase tends to have a number of unfortunate side effects. In particular the discharge of energy in the case of most gods and in some goddesses of causing all the fluids of their body to be highly caustic to mundane matter. This burning of the bedding and the mattress and bed is the effect of the sweat of a goddess whilst she slept on your ship.'

'Why didn't...? For a moment it seemed that was all my next question would be as I couldn't complete my question but just leaned against Deepa who supported me in her arms and looked closely at my hands.

'Why didn't you burn in a similar manner?' Inspector Bhairava frowned. 'That is a puzzle at the moment, there are three possibilities. First, the Cindy aspect of your visitor was somehow in the ascendant when you touched her and hence any body fluids you came in contact with were mundane in form. Second, the goddess was for some reason careful not to harm you. Third, that you yourself are a god.' He stared at me hard for a moment and I felt his gaze drilling through me in a most peculiar way.

‘Well we can dismiss the third possibility Dr Chandra, you are certainly not a god, I can see that. As to whether the goddess showed mercy to you or Cindy was in the ascendant when you touched, it is fruitless to speculate on that without further data. The data from the scan of the remains of the needle should be available shortly and then it will be fruitful to speculate further over that matter.’

Rom’s voice broke in over the comm link. ‘Dr Chandra, Inspector Bhairava, please come to the bridge we have some data that will interest you I think.’

We went onto the bridge and sat down out our stations and Inspector Bhairava stood between us and the main screen and looking at Rom said.

‘What is the nature of this new data?’

‘Inspector Bhairava, your ground stations have relayed data to us gathered from the initial event resembling a meteor shower emanating from central India. I have been processing the visual data and it appears to have a bearing on the subsequent events.’

Rom projected an image taken from a ground station which showed what appeared to be a sequence in which a bright meteor shot across the heavens and disappeared over the horizon.

‘If that image is enhanced the area of brightness at the centre of the meteor can be resolved thus.’ He hit some keys on his input console and replayed the sequence. Only now it zoomed in on the image and the bright light could be seen to be a halo around some thing most bizarre. It looked to all intents and purposes like a wild haired woman riding on a mule and bearing a broom in her hands.

‘Eh?’ Chopra said in a puzzled tone, ‘I recognise that image from my childhood, isn’t that...’

Inspector Bhairava completed his sentence for him. ‘Shitala goddess of smallpox, yes that is exactly what it looks like, and for a very good reason I think.’

‘Camouflage?’ Chopra suggested.

‘Hardly Mr Chopra, it looks like Shitala, simply because it is Shitala.’

Inspector Bhairava shook his head and scowled. ‘The goddesses of hearth and home have held aloof from this war before this. If they are now involved it is clear that there is going to be destruction on, well on the scale that is taking place. Yes it is beginning to fall into place.’

No biological warfare units are in action, Shitala alone is the equal of a whole army and she can devastate with plague and epidemic in a most effective manner.'

He glanced at Rom, 'Mr Rom, am I right in presuming that your speculations are leading you to believe the source of the meteor like phenomena was in central India in your corresponding Buddha field?'

'Affirmative, Inspector Bhairava, near Jabalpur.'

Bhairava started to pace up and down and grimaced. 'Near Jabalpur you say, that is bad it means that the sixty-four Yogini goddesses have woken up. They have slept throughout aeons on the journey, their powers are hard to control at the best of times and during a war they are even harder to control.'

Bhairava's comm link bleeped and he looked down at a data relay device he held in his hand. 'Shit,' he said and sat down at an unoccupied work station.

'This is all we need, not just sixty-four Yogini goddesses on the loose wreaking havoc on the great vehicle. But what I suspected from everything you have told me and all the clues so far, is now confirmed by the scan of the needle.'

He seemed to glow with a nervous energy and I noticed that the monitors near home were beginning to activate without being turned on at all.

In a distracted tone he said, 'I was convinced she was gone from the great vehicle altogether, gone to travel in the great vessel of the Triumvirate...but who else could mastermind an attack on the Asuras like this? I should have guessed.'

He turned and looked at me and said emphatically, 'Dr Chandra you are remarkable man, consider yourself most blessed, you have held the great goddess Durga in your arms and lived to tell the tale, many gods would envy you.'

As he spoke he seemed to glow with a blue energy that illuminated the bridge and for an instant I saw him in a different light. Instead of an Inspector in a khaki uniform he seemed a blue skinned god with a dark blue throat with a third eye in the middle of his brow and the crescent moon as his forehead crest.

'Pardon me,' he said, 'I must convey this news to the council of the 33, thank you for your help in our enquiries, you are now free to go where you will.'

As he spoke his image seemed to flicker and phase into and out of reality. One moment a police inspector, one moment a blue skinned god in animal skins with a trident in his hand, one moment a dancing figure in a ring of fire playing a drum that seemed to embody the dance of creation and destruction and the very next moment an empty space on the bridge of the ship.

The monitors near where he had been sitting gradually faded as the residual charge from his presence dissipated.

‘So that’s how he could tell if I was a god,’ I thought to myself, ‘he was one.’

Vajrasana: 02/10/2645 06:18

An eddy of wind picked up a swirl of dust in it as it curled through the air and crossed our path in the alley way. The cool air of the dawn hours was otherwise undisturbed as we made our way across the plaza and made our way towards the bus stand. We had discussed what to do next round the table in the cafeteria in the ship while we mulled over what had happened overnight. It was clear that we couldn’t fly the ship anywhere in the midst of the war and carnage that was wreaking havoc over the surface of the disk habitat. So we were going to have to adopt the plan of travelling overland to the mountains.

‘Rom, you stay with the ship, we will be in contact with you as far as possible and if it becomes possible you can bring the ship and the rest of the crew with you to meet us up ahead.’ Deepa had said to Rom as we left the ship.

As we walked I looked at our party, myself, Gopika, Deepa, Champa, Chopra and Uravashi. The rest of the crew had stayed with the ship, we didn’t want to risk more of us on what was a risky mission.

‘Good luck, we’ll see you soon I am sure.’ Natasha’s words still rang in my ears, could she be so sure or had she just said that to try and reassure us? I thought I knew the answer from the sad look in her eyes as she had stared at us as we trooped away from the ship.

Beyond the plaza with its neat planning by the first Buddhas the plan of the streets and alleyways was more chaotic. It was as if the town planners had never thought through all of the plans of the city, if indeed there had been planners at all. Despite the skyscrapers and mansions being clean and well finished they were often clustered

together in a random crush of plots. A dog slinking around the corner of an alley caught my eye, as he turned the corner he stared at me and I could have sworn he winked at me before he disappeared. When we reached the corner and turned it I looked at where he had gone.

‘Deepa, look at that, there is an open drain running in the narrow space between these buildings and...’

‘Yuck, Chandra, it smells foul, its disgusting.’ Deepa said holding her nose.

‘You’d think these people wouldn’t have left open sewers running amidst such mansions.’

‘They sometimes seem to overlook things in a strange way I agree.’

Everywhere the closer you looked the more apparent it was that while on the one hand the inhabitants could manipulate space and time as easy as cooking a cake, they still let their sewage run untreated into open drains. Round the next corner we found our way partially blocked by a pile of smoking garbage smouldering in a heap in the street. We gingerly picked away round the obstacle avoiding a sleeping family of dogs, mother and pups, who were happily slumbering on the warmth of the decomposing rubbish midden.

Champa said she knew a place where we could hire a ground craft to take us to the foothills and had called ahead and made arrangements for it to be ready for us.

We entered a square which was as chaotic as the spaceport was neat and precise. All manner of small and large ground vehicles were parked at random all over it, many obstructing each other. All manner of people, mostly human it seemed were gathered around the vehicles with great piles of baggage they were variously sitting on, standing beside or attempting to load into or onto the vehicles. Some of the vehicles were sleek and obviously designed for speed, others were mobile freight transports, some seemed to hedge their bets and be a mix of bus and truck with space for freight on the roof and crowded seats inside cramped behind a driving cab, which also doubled up it seemed as an overflow for stuff that wouldn’t fit on the roof.

‘There is Vijay, Heh Vijay how’s it going?’ Champa cried out waving in the direction of a tall figure in a colourful turban and long white shirt and blue check wrap around cloth.

‘First class Ms Champa, absolutely top, I have your ground craft ready, top model, first class travel mode, behold!’ Vijay said pointing

vaguely behind him in the general direction of a number of craft, including one of the sleek passenger craft. We set off across the square and as we did I saw our ground craft drive away, revealing standing behind it one of the ramshackle mixed traffic vehicles.

‘Beautiful, yes, you are saying to yourself, the perfect craft for your trip, ideal for comfortable, inconspicuous, travel through rural areas.’ Vijay enthused as he stood by the side of the bus. Emblazoned on its side was the logo “Jaitlee Super 73”, the effect was slightly spoilt by the way the screws fixing the sign to the body panels stood slightly proud of the surface, and didn’t seem to all be of the same size.

‘Are you sure this is the vehicle we ordered?’ Deepa asked Champa.

Champa shrugged and wrinkled her nose up and said, ‘Well...’

He spotted a sense of diffidence in our attitude to the bus and added, ‘Please, don’t judge it by its appearance, the local body work may not be to your taste, but the main frame and drive is an original first Buddha model from Kambhoja. Come on don’t stand on ceremony hop in and make yourself at home.’

I grabbed the railing and swung myself up onto the bus, as long as I was careful to avoid bashing my head on the luggage racks it turned out to be fairly comfortable inside. ‘Not so bad I suppose, there is plenty of room for us.’

There were eight in our party including us and Vijay and the driver Pappu. As the bus was intended apparently to seat about sixteen we all fitted easily. We all piled in and sat down.

I sat down by a window on the passenger side and as we pulled out Vijay hung out of the doorway slapping on the bus side and shouting instructions to Pappu about avoiding the crowds of close packed buses and people and their possessions in the stand. The sun had been gradually climbing above the houses around the square and its heat was beginning to build up and it was good to feel the breeze as we turned onto the highway and picked up speed. We headed over the great suspension bridge across the river and set off though across the paddy fields and palm groves on the opposite shore.

‘How long is the journey to the foothills going to take?’ I asked Gopika.

Gopika shook her head and said, ‘It depends on the state of the road.’

‘Vijay what’s the road like at the moment?’

‘The road from here to Rajagaha was washed out a while ago but repairs are proceeded apace, from there to Chipka the road is excellent, its the original road, first class. The road is a little rough to Lakrihat at the moment, but all in all you should not complain.’

‘So how long will it take Vijay?’

‘Eight hours to Chipka, and then another eight to Lakrihat.’

Gopika looked at me, ‘Call it a day Chandra, close as matters.’

I settled down for a while to watch the scenery as we bumped along the road to Rajagaha. Looking down I saw that the carriage way was made up of a patchwork quilt of sections of surface in a kind of crazy paving pattern.

‘Vijay, what is the road made of?’

‘Mr Chandra, yes? This section of the road is a recent rebuild of the old road, its surfaced in the latest in finishes, hot mixed pine sap and extra fine grade river sand with added straw for smoothness, wonderful eh?’

I wasn’t sure of the source of his enthusiasm but nodded anyway.

We were driving through increasingly less developed areas as we left behind the great space port. Here and there were the bare shells of what looked First Buddha built structures, but they didn’t seem to be in use. Instead people seemed to prefer to make dwellings from natural materials such as mud bricks, plaster and earthenware ceramic tiles and even thatch. One thing that made the buildings distinctive was the presence of intricate patterns in white traced onto their ochre walls. Some were abstract, tessellated intricate designs, others were of animals and people as if seen though some kind of x ray vision. Somehow flattened and stylised yet full of life.

‘Rum do Dr Chandra don’t you think?’

‘What’s that Chopra?’

‘The power outages that Champa has been telling me about, dreadful.’

‘What? Power cuts? Why? What effect do they have.’

Chopra waved his hand at the scenery out the window.

‘All of this Chandra mate, the non-functioning habitat units and the need to build temporary dwellings.’

‘Chopra, Tell me more?’ I was hooked, ‘so the First Buddha buildings were not working properly any more?’

‘Pretty much so, seems that the ability of the materials to adapt to the thoughts of the users that characterises First Buddha constructions relies on some sort of power flow that keeps failing. So you go to sleep happily sleeping in your bed in your high tech First Buddha home, over night the power goes down and you wake up with a thump as your bed becomes the blank floor surface under you and your other colourful furniture and fittings simply merges back into the walls. All you are left with is a grey and featureless shell.’

‘So why don’t they fit out the shells with ordinary furniture and fittings?’

‘If the power comes back on then the saved set of mind generated furniture and fittings always comes back on as the house is booting up. Makes a terrible mess Gopika tells me, breaks all the regular furniture into bits. Not to mention the mess it makes of the people in the rooms at the time unless they manage to get out in time.’

‘So what you are telling me is the old habitats are uninhabitable nowadays?’

‘Exactly Dr Chandra, you have got it in one. So they have to make houses as best they can do, trouble is they have forgotten how to make concrete, steel and other durable materials. So they use whatever is available.’

‘Unfired mud bricks, lime plaster, earthenware tiles, wood and thatch?’

‘You hit the nail on the head, least ways if they can find an old nail you would have hit it on the head.’

The further we went the more obvious it became that the problems for the disk inhabitants were getting more and more involved. We drove over a wide area where there were no fields, just a bare and dusty landscape in which only the odd plant grew.

‘What’s going on here Vijay?’ I asked as the clouds of dust on the road began to swirl into the open windows of the bus and cover everything with a fine layer of yellow brown silt.

‘Irrigation system failure, Dr Chandra, the pumps don’t work during power outages and so the canal systems in this area have been running dry for long periods.’

We passed though a choking cloud of dust as the bus jolted over a section of the road that seemed to barely better than a collection of

potholes through the beginning of a ravine system that seemed to be cutting its way down thought the surface.

‘Trouble is then seasonal rain control systems are also becoming unpredictable and sudden downpours carry off the topsoil from the barren areas.’

He turned from speaking to me and shouted out at everybody.

‘Hold on to your seat passengers please this next section is a little rough.’

A little rough did not describe the next few miles at all, basically it was nothing more than a rough line of sight through the growing ravine system that was dissecting this plateau area that we driving through.

Suddenly it came to me that Tau Ceti III had had an almost identical landscape, had it been once an engineered world like this? I began to wonder about whether the systems breakdowns here would lead eventually to a similar hostile environment totally unsuitable for habitation.

I changed my seat and sat down with Champa. ‘Tell me about these power outages, what is going on?’

‘I am not really the right person to ask you know, I have been asking people myself, it seems that while we have been away there have been gradually more and more failures in systems on the habitat disk. The main problem seems to be with the power supply system, when it goes down other things fail, and it seems that the back up systems are not working correctly for some reason.’

‘Can’t they be fixed?’

‘Who can fix them? They were built by the First Buddhas, nobody knows how to fix the things they built, we can build substitutes, but not mend the originals.’

Chopra turned around and leant over the seat back in front and asked.

‘I have been meaning to ask for a while, why don’t any of these Buddhas you keep talking about mend the ship for the rest of the inhabitants? Okay you don’t understand their technology, so why not get them to fix it?’

Champa shook her head and tilted it forward so we could not see her eyes.

‘Its taken you a while to realise that this is the heart of the problem we face, we are loyal to the Buddhas, we serve the Buddhas, their Teachings and the community of the followers of the Buddhas. But we have a problem.’

‘What is the problem?’

‘The Buddhas don’t seem to be here at the moment.’

‘Eh? I thought you said that they could walk through time a while ago to me?’

‘Probably.’

‘Probably?’ Chopra said and raised his eyebrows, ‘What kind of an answer it that?’

‘That is the problem you see,’ Champa stared at me intently. ‘We have not seen one of the First Buddhas now for many aeons, at first we were not sure of why this was, then we realised that it was probably that they were letting things run without paying any hands on attention to the management of the habitat disk. Then the inhabitants of the disk began to argue about what had happened. The trouble is the manual for summoning the Buddhas in emergencies also does not make sense to anybody now.’

‘What does is say?’

‘The point is what it does not say. It says that in the event of an emergency if no Buddha is currently in your area then you cannot know whether any First Buddha is present or not present, nor yet whether they are neither present and not present or neither not present and present at the same time. You have to admit its a bit confusing. One faction interprets this to mean they are not present any longer in the disk, and we should try and take over the running of the disk, the other faction believe they are present and we should trust them to fix things before everything falls to pieces.’

I began to see the light. ‘What do you believe Champa?’

‘The Buddhas are present and they will fix everything at the right time.’

‘What does the Mara faction believe?’

‘The Buddhas are gone and its time to take over running the great vehicle.’

I was about to ask about whether they had attempted to find where the Buddhas had gone when with a great crash the bus bounded over

an enormous pothole and I saw some of our baggage from the roof come sailing down and crash onto the ground by the bus.

‘Stop the bus brother Pappu!’ Vijay cried out. ‘Some of the luggage has got a little bit out of place.’

‘A little out of place!’ Chopra snorted staring at our baggage littered around the spot where the bus had bumped over the great pothole that was where the road crossed a small ravine.

‘Might as well stretch my legs.’ I said to Deepa as I stood up and got down from the bus.

‘Me too, I need a break from all this constant buffeting in the bus.’ Deepa added and got down after me. Vijay and Pappu also got out and began to gather together the luggage and seemed to start arguing with each other over whose fault it was it had fallen off.

‘Obviously Vijay brother, it was not tied down properly.’

‘Hardly Pappu, it was you not slowing down enough that made it fall off.’

‘Whoa guys,’ Chopra said surveying the scene.

‘Never mind why it fell off lets get it back onto the bus again.’

I and Deepa climbed to the top of a nearby hillock and surveyed the scene of desolation all around us. A vast landscape of ravines cut through the old agricultural plain and here and there the streams had almost worn down it seemed to a bed rock level of grey stone.

‘This is a mess Chandra.’ Deepa said waving out at the scene.

‘What do you think the grey bedrock is Deepa?’ I asked.

‘Perhaps it is first Buddha construction material, shall we take a look?’

‘Why not? It will be a while before Vijay and Pappu managed to get the luggage stowed to Chopra’s satisfaction from the look of how things are going.’

‘Hey Chopra,’ Deepa called out to him, ‘we are just going to take a little look around, we will be back in a moment.’

To be honest I am not sure if he noticed what Deepa said he was so involved in trying to get Vijay to tie down the luggage effectively this time.

Anyhow we walked down into the next ravine and out onto the grey surface. It was first Buddha construction material. It had that typical grey look to it.

‘Amazing,’ Deepa said, ‘to think that all this natural scenery is but a thin mantle over an artificial base.’

I looked around and wondered if the surface was as thin everywhere.

‘What’s that Chandra?’ Deepa said pointing to a kind of grey hillock to our left.

‘Let’s find out, its only a few yards away.’

We walked over to the grey hillock. It nestled in the side of the ravine and was obviously being exposed by the stream as it carried away the topsoil. As we got up close I saw that it was a kind of low arched structure in the side of the ravine with a patch of darkness under the archway.

‘Maybe its part of the drainage system, let’s take a closer look.’ Deepa said.

‘Okay, but take care, you don’t want to slip and break an ankle or anything.’

Deepa went up to the archway and bent down and peered inside.

‘There are steps inside its some sort of house or temple I think, come on over and tell me what you think.’

I walked up and joined her and we bent down and looked at a step just inside the threshold.

‘Ah ha,’ I said, looks like a well to me, lets see if there is any water in it.’

We stepped down together a single step into the archway.

I should have remembered that even a single foot wrong in a First Buddha artefact can lead to trouble.

As our feet hit the step everything went dark and I was thrown from the step into the air as if hit by a great blast of energy and found myself plastered to the ceiling of the chamber and unable to move.

‘Chandra! What’s happening?’ Deepa cried out, she was just beside me in the same predicament. I felt a sense of deja vu for a moment and then knew what was happening.

‘Deepa, we are in a high speed lift of some sort and it is dropping down at such speed that we are being held against the roof by the speed of the descent.’

‘God, what is going to happen when we stop?’

‘I don’t know, lets hope we stop, and prepare for a fall when we do.’

Preparing for a fall is not easy when it happens without any warning. All I knew was that suddenly something changed and I crashed from

the roof of the chamber downwards and as I hit my head on the ground I lost consciousness.

‘Chandra? Are you there?’ I heard Deepa saying as I came round.

‘Yes I am here, but where are we? Its pitch black in here I can’t see anything.’

‘Neither can I, are you okay?’

‘A little shaken but I will be all right, and you?’

‘Likewise, what shall we do?’

‘Deepa, on Tau Ceti III the controls were always on the left side of chambers, lets feel around and see if there is anything.’

In the darkness we groped around, first contacting only each other and then clinging onto each other for comfort as we felt our way around us. The chamber was probably only about six feet in diameter and about five feet high so we could not even stand up in it. The floor was flat now it seemed. Then we found that in one direction there seemed to be a step, probably the one we had stood on that had activated the lift.

‘What kind of a thing do you think this is Chandra?’ Deepa asked in a worried tone, ‘A trap of some kind?’

‘I don’t think so Deepa, I think its probably some kind of maintenance access, a manhole, and we have gone and fallen down it, this is all we need.’

The next moment my fingers ran across the left side of wall by the doorstep and I felt a shape under my fingers and as I touched it a panel lit up and a doorway slid open in the front of us in the chamber.

The power was still working here okay, the doorway even had a self translating sign above the doorway.

“Habitat Ecology Logistics Level.”

‘What can you see Deepa?’ I asked hoping to get a confirmation that what I could see through the doorway was not really what was there, her response was to say. ‘Chandra,’ in a tremulous voice as she clung tightly on to me, ‘For God’s sake press the up button! Please God let there be an up button.’

I felt around and pressed the panel again, hoping that it would do something to get us out of this place. For an instant as the doors snapped shut and before the sudden acceleration slammed us down on the floor I thought we were finished.

Moments later the lift hurled us a last time into the air and came to a halt and we scrambled from the archway, half dead, half alive. Our bodies ached. Our bones hurt. Our clothes were scorched. Our faces and exposed skin were beginning to burn. We smelt of sulphur. We were bruised all over. We just collapsed on our backs and stared at the sky.

‘Chandra, it was hell down there, what was happening?’

‘All I could see was walls of fire, explosions of sparks, rivers of molten lava, smoke and clouds of gas and steam, burning machines and wrecked devices, and...’

‘And... and...there were things fighting. I could see them, Asuras, demons, I don’t know what they were, but they were fighting with each other, hacking at each other with axes and knives, there was blood everywhere...and fire...’

‘Deepa, I don’t think they were fighting with each other I could see what they were fighting with was another sort of demon all together. There were wild haired boar headed and pig faced women of some sort that were destroying and killing everything in their path. Deepa, they were breathing fire, I think that one of them spotted us and breathed in our direction, but the lift door snapped shut before we felt the full impact of the blast.’

‘Chandra, lets get out of here.’

I didn’t need to reply, Deepa helped me to my feet and we stumbled as fast as we could across the disk surface, up the hill and over the ragged landscape and in a moment we saw Chopra’s worried face staring at us.

‘God, what happened to you two?’

‘No time to tell you now, back to the bus, let’s get out of here.’

Chopra helped us stagger back the last few paces and Uravashi and Vijay helped us to get back on the bus.

Pappu put the bus in drive and we set off away from our ill fated stop and its glimpse of the chaos that lay below the placid country side. We recounted our tale as Champa and Gopika tended our burns with the basic medical kit we had with us.

‘You both have radiation burns, I am not sure how bad they are, in addition to the heat burns, I think that you may find that you are going to look and feel very strange for a while.’ Champa said rubbing some sort of salve gently onto my cheeks. I blinked, there was something

wrong. Champa nodded, ‘Yes, your eyelashes have burnt away, they will grow back soon though.’ She rubbed salve onto my forehead.

‘Still we know one thing now, that must be why the systems are breaking down now on the habitat disk, the Yogini goddesses may be driving the Asuras from the lower decks, but in the process they are destroying them as well.’

Gopika stared out the window after she put a bandage on Deepa’s hand.

‘How you survived I don’t know, you could easily have been killed down there.’

Habitat Ecology Logistics Level: 2/10/2645 28:08

The area was clean of Asuras now, Durga sighed and breathed in deeply. Her inbreath drew in all the Yogini emanations from around her and their dreadful forms slipped back into her. Some slipped into her mouth, some into her nostrils, some into her third eye, some into her ears, some into her other orifices.

‘Why do Chandra and Deepa keep popping up everywhere? Eh boy?’ She said stroking her lion’s mane, ‘Silly buggers it was dam close there, I had to hide my presence with a cloud of fire or they would have seen me, but it must have also scorched them to.’

She looked around, it was she felt, a bit of a mess, all the First Buddha technology was wrecked, she poked at a piece of the debris and turned it over. It said on it, ‘Vajrasana Mahavihar human waste recycling system central processor unit’. She kicked it and it flew onto the heap of similar rubbish that now lay in a great heap in the middle of the area. She clapped her hands together and thunder rolled around her and lightning sparked and the pile of ancient and irreplaceable machinery burst into flame.

‘Forget to honour the Goddess would they eh?’ She spat on the ground in disgust, her spit full of bile and phlegm.

She disappeared. The spit began to eat its way down though the surface leaving behind a wormhole like tunnel. Inexorably sinking down towards where it would eventually penetrate the outer hull and then drift away into the infinite depths of space.

On the road to Lakrihat: 2/10/2645 18:15

The difference in the road after Rajagaha was incredible. From there on it was original First Buddha highway. No pine sap and sand patchwork quilt of crocheted potholes, but a smooth clear freeway.

Leaning back in my seat and trying not to move at all I could still see out of the corner of my eye that the landscape gradually recovered from the dreadful desert we had crossed and as we approached the mountains becoming fertile and lush again.

Not that any of us now had any faith in what we saw about us lasting for aeons more, it was a rush now to make it to the mountains and over the border into the heaven of the 33 to hunt down Chang if it was possible.

Night fell as Pappu drove the bus up the winding roads that threaded their way into the mountains. Gradually the clean smell of cedar and pine needles wafted to our noses as the air temperature dropped and the burbling sound of brooks dashing down steep gullies filled the air as we wound up the highway into the mountains. The cool air was like balm to my burns and despite the aches and pains in my body I fell asleep sitting up in my seat. My head lolling to one side and resting against Chandra's shoulder as we both slipped into fitful dreams after our close shave with death.

I dreamed that dusk was falling as I and Chandra emerged from a forest by the edge of a crag that stood at the top of a scree slope. We climbed the crag to see if we could see where we were. All we could see was a forest stretching off in all directions. We knew it was an illusion.

'Should we sleep here on this rocky ledge by the side of the peak or down in the forest do you think?' Chandra asked.

I sighed and said, 'Look what happened when we slept in the forest last time, I don't think we can risk it, lets sleep here, we may be safe here for the night.'

We lay down and after we had eaten frugally from our remaining rations and drunk a little water we lay down to sleep.

I slipped into a fitful dream and turned from side to side on the rocky ledge. In my dream I found myself waking to a sense that something was wrong. My hands were above my head and I sensed that I could not move them. I sensed a warm breath on my cheek, I opened my

eyes and saw the face of Vera Chang staring intently at me from close range.

‘Deepa, how nice to see your eyes up close.’

I stared back into Vera’s pale green sparkling eyes and stuttered.’

‘Vera, what is this, why are you here?’

Vera brushed my lips with her fingers and holding her face just over mine whispered.

‘No the question Deepa you must ask is how come you are here?’

I looked around, I was not on the ledge on the rocky crag.

I was rather in a room lit by a gentle amber light from a paper lantern that hung just behind my head. The walls were hung with pale green and gold silken hangings and tapestries. There were also hanging scrolls of brush paintings of mountains and waterfalls and of parties of women playing instruments and men and women picnicking in the woods at the base of mountains. The walls of the room seemed otherwise bare and featureless, I could not see any windows. To my left a black and gold lacquer folding screen obscured something, perhaps the door. To my right, behind Vera, was a tall cupboard like a wardrobe with numerous doors, draws and shelves in it. It was dark red stained wood and each door had a different ideogram on it. On each side of the bed at its head was a side table with a lighted candle floating like a lotus in a bowl of water with rose petals scattered over the surface. The air was heavy with the scent of roses mixed with a touch of the smell of night flowering jasmine.

I tried to raise my head and look down, I glimpsed my body clad in my red and gold sari stretched out on cream satin sheets.

Vera laughed, I tried to move, to get up, but felt myself somehow petrified. Vera leant over me and I could feel her hot breath on my neck and then I felt her teeth sink into my flesh and pain shot through every pore of my body.

Vera pulled away and stared into my eyes and whispered.

‘Good, very good, you are a gorgeous find Deepa, for aeons it seems I have sought a woman like you. Now we can spend millennia together as I shape you to my will. Sleep my darling, sleep.’ She brushed my eyes with her fingers and I felt them close as she did so. As I drifted into unconsciousness all I could see was her eyes, green and glittering. In my last moments of consciousness the green of her eyes seemed to brighten into a lime green glow which washed over

my consciousness and suffused everything with a radiant light into which I fell as if I was falling down an infinite tunnel.

‘Deepa’ I felt a hand shaking my shoulder and opened my eyes.

Instead of Vera I saw Chandra’s dark brown eyes staring down at me from a under a brow furrowed by worry.

‘Deepa wake up, the ledge may not be safe in the full light we have to move.’

I glanced around me, the crags, the rocks, the ledge, all were as before when I lay down to sleep. I shivered.

‘Lets go Chandra, I had a terrible nightmare here, lets get out of here.’

Chandra helped me up and we set off down the slope toward the forest.

As we walked he suddenly remarked.

‘Deepa? I don’t remember biting your neck last night, what happened.’

I shuddered and felt the side of my throat, it was the impression made by a set of human teeth in my throat. The pain in my neck grew intense and as it did so I felt a jolting motion and realised that I was on a bus and that the pain in my neck was not a bite mark but a burn.

‘Chandra, wake up,’ I shook his shoulder.

‘Deepa, what is it?’ he said sleepily.

‘Were we just together in a forest and I had just had a nightmare?’

‘Deepa, I was asleep on the bus until you woke me up just now.’

‘Sorry Chandra, I had a weird nightmare, of a nightmare in a nightmare.’

‘Its okay Deepa, go back to sleep its all right.’ He said gently caressing my hair as if patting me. He fell back asleep.

I couldn’t sleep. I don’t think I dared go back to sleep. Instead I watched as the dawn broke and the bus wound its way down the hill sides and into the Lakrihat valley. Gradually the steep slopes gave way to terraced fields and hamlets and we descended in the morning light into the bowl of the valley.

‘Good morning Deepa, how are you?’ Champa asked looking with concern at my deeply shadowed eyes.

‘Not good Champa, I dreamed all manner of dreadful things last night.’

‘It cannot have been easy sleeping after such an ordeal, lets hope you can get proper rest when we get to the lodge.’

‘I hope so too.’

‘Hey Vijay!’ Champa called out, ‘how long now until we get to Sthanamela?’

‘Not long now Champa, see we are already entering the city of Lakrihat.’

I looked out and saw that we had just passed a temple in the middle of a cross roads and were driving over a narrow bridge over a fast flowing mountain stream. All around were tall houses with overhanging balconies and verandas that lined the streets and gave glimpses of alley ways and courtyards behind their facades.

Here and there richly carved wooden gateways and brightly painted murals enlivened the red brick walls. Every where all the available wooden surfaces were covered in intricate carvings of gods, demons and floral designs. Gradually the morning traffic on the road was getting busier and by the time we pulled into Sthanamela the traffic was almost at a standstill. Finally when the road had narrowed so much that it seemed little more than an alleyway that was winding its way through a crowded market we suddenly pulled off the road into a gateway. The bus drove along a short drive lined with box trees and stopped in a small courtyard.

‘Everybody off! Vijay said. ‘We are here, Lakrihat Lodge.’

‘Looks a bit of all right to me.’ Chopra said blinking as he roused himself from the sleep of the blessed and stared around the bus.

‘Eh,’ he said shaking Gopika’s shoulder who was sleeping with her head nestled on his shoulder. ‘Wake up sleepy head, we are here at last.’

Gopika stirred, stretched her arms above her head and yawned so that her back arched like a cat waking up from a sleep. Then she opened her eyes wide and smiled.

‘Sthanamela, my favourite place for food in the mountains, I wonder if they will have that jasmine honey syrup with the pancakes in this season?’

She and Chopra were off the bus in an instant and before anybody could stop them had rushed into the entrance to the lodge.

I got off and stood in the bright sunlight staring at the lodge. It was four stories tall. Like the other buildings in the city each floor seemed

to be cantilevered out from that below and it looked a little like an upside down jelly somehow balancing on its head. The whole impression of everything being topsy-turvy disappeared the instant we walked in through the doorway. Instead it was like being at home. Comfortable armchairs and couches were ranged around a spacious pillared room. At one end there was a counter area where the hotel staff stood and at the other end an open fire around which some guests were sitting.

Vijay was standing at the counter and chatting with somebody behind it.

‘Bahadur my friend, six rooms of your best rooms for the night for our passengers. I and Pappu will be staying down the road at the Anarkali lodge with the bus before we set off back to Vajrasana tomorrow.’

Bahadur’s face was suddenly animated by a broad smile, ‘six rooms in the old wing it is then, with views onto the courtyard, a pleasure Vijay my old friend and the standard arrangements, eh?’

Champa cut in, ‘What are they then?’

Bahadur positively gleamed with joy as he looked at her.

‘The best rates you can imagine for you, Vijay’s friends are my friends...’

I lost track of what was happening as I realised two things at once: Champa, Vijay and Bahadur were involved in the beginning of a long negotiation that might take hours to conclude and the smell of pancakes was pulling me inexorably towards a doorway at the back of the hall. Actually I realised it was Chandra too who was pulling me along as he was hauling on my hand and saying.

‘Don’t dawdle Deepa! Come on let’s get something to eat, I am starving.’

The doorway led into an area that was a cross between a garden and a court yard, green grass lined the ground while the wings of the lodge framed the area into an L shaped area.

‘Hey Deepa!’ Gopika called out, ‘The pancakes are wonderful you must try them, even Yakshi magic couldn’t make anything as delicious.’ She giggled and I could hear her say quietly to Chopra.

‘Least ways a tired Yakshi after a long journey couldn’t.’

We sat down at great cedar wood table and ordered and soon the taste of pancakes and fresh butter and honey was filling my mouth.

While my nose was filled with the fragrance of fresh brewed coffee. I ate ravenously and realised that I was utterly famished after the adventures of the last twenty four hours.

‘Chandra, when did we last eat?’ I asked as I picked up another forkful of pancake and put it in my mouth.

‘Umm,’ Chandra said swallowing a great gulp of coffee, ‘must have been breakfast in Vajrasana, then the shock of the that nightmarish decent to the lower levels drove all thought of everything from my mind, even food.’

He looked at a plate of cinnamon rolls and butter which had just been slipped onto our table by the waiter without us even noticing and said.

‘Mind you, the food here is worth fasting for twenty four hours before so that you have an appetite to eat everything!’

I didn’t bother to reply, my answer was clear from how I tucked into the plate in front of me.

Eventually after I don’t know how many plates of pancakes Champa emerged from the hall and announced that a deal satisfactory to her had been brokered, and that Vijay and Pappu had been sent packing with a flea in their ear.

‘Never try to fleece a Yakshi,’ she growled, then giggled, ‘we don’t let the wool grow in our ears!’

Our rooms were on the second floor overlooking the garden courtyard. Standing on the balcony I could also see the mountains in the distance. Range after range of great snow crested peak stretching off into the distance. I thought I could see a spaceport of the Previous Buddhas on a hill crest at the edge of the valley.

‘What’s that white structure?’ I asked Champa who had come with me to my room, to check she said that we were getting what she had paid for.

‘Khudmauzood, the great stupa that rose first from the waters of the lake that once filled the valley they say. It is sacred site of the First Buddhas. See the golden glinting light by the white dome?’

I looked hard and saw a glint of light shining off some kind of a spire by the great dome that stood on the hill crest. ‘Yes I can see something, what is it?’

‘It is a shrine to the goddess Meenakshi who is famous throughout this valley and they say sleeps there even today in tunnels under the

dome. One day she will wake they say and open up the secret ancient ways through the mountains that lead to the hidden valleys beyond.’

‘In the heaven of the thirty-three gods?’

Champa laughed, her laughter like water trilling in a babbling brook.

‘No silly of course not, the secret valleys don’t really exist in this world or the next, they say they exist out of time and space all together.’

The lovely image of the high hidden valleys seem to soothe my mind and as I lay my head down on the soft down pillow in my room I slipped straight into a deep sleep. A deep and thankfully dreamless sleep that allowed me to rest for the first time since I had had the nightmare on the bus.

Lakrihat Lodge:4/10/ 2645 21:18

Soft breezes were drifting through the trees in the courtyard and wafting the scent of jasmine to my nostrils as I awoke. I looked around me, I realised I must have slept for hours. I had been totally exhausted, it was night now, I must have slept the day away. I thought I heard the sound of a foot step to the left of my bed and turned my head and looked in that direction for the first time.

Against the dark background of the shadows in the corner of the room a figure was standing. A woman’s stood in the darkness.

‘Who is there?’ I asked softly, wondering who had come into my room at night, had I locked the door? I wondered then the thought slipped from my mind.

‘Its me,’ Deepa said softly and moved forward and sat on the bedside.

‘What’s wrong Deepa? Can’t you sleep?’

I reached out and put my hand over hers on the bed cover.

‘The nightmares are coming back to haunt me Chandra, I don’t understand what’s happening. Can I stay with you tonight? It might help me to rest easy.’

I could hardly refuse such a request now could I. I nodded my head wondering what was going to happen next.

Deepa smiled and I saw here eyes glinting in the shadows. She pulled down the covers and slipped into bed beside me. She lay beside me curled up on her left side and lay her right arm over my chest and breathed a deep sigh.

‘Thank you Chandra, to be with you tonight makes me feel safer.’

So saying she cuddled up against me and embraced me laying her cheek against mine. She breathed deeply and whispered in my ear.

‘It seems that I have searched for somebody like you for aeons and now I have found you darling. Now we can spend millennia together.’

‘Deepa...’ I started to ask why she was talking this way. She brushed my lips with her finger tips and whispered in my ear.

‘Hush dear Chandra, don’t say a word.’ She didn’t need to say any more as she nuzzled against my body and her lips touched mine words were not needed. Our bodies said everything that needed to be said.

Chapter 5

Right Livelihood

Lakrihat Lodge: 4/10/2645 20:18

In the light of candles floating in bowls of rose water on the cabinets at the sides of the bed I gazed at the silhouette of Deepa's face. It was in shadow but behind her the amber light from the paper lantern hanging above the bed picked up on the crimson highlights in an old red stained wooden cabinet behind her.

'Chandra, I think I may know a way to cut short our journey.'

'How Deepa?'

'I have heard there are tunnels from the Khudmauzood temple complex that lead through the mountains. Will you come with me to check it out?'

'When?'

'Now.' She said getting out of bed and pulling on my hand she seemed to drag me from the bed as if I was unable to resist her every desire. I found myself not even dressing but accompanying her out the door before I even knew what was happening wearing only a shirt but no trousers.

As we passed down the empty corridors of the hotel nobody was stirring. Even in the lobby there was nobody at the counter. Only a dog was sleeping curled up by the fire. As we slipped through he looked up and started to growl it seemed at Deepa. She fixed the dog with a steely glare and it whimpered and turned away and curled itself into a ball as if trying to hide from something it didn't want to acknowledge.

We were out the door in a trice and down the box tree lined drive. The moonlight cast deep shadows everywhere that it did not illuminate with its cold light.

We scurried out the gates, I remember thinking, 'That's odd there is no night watchman,' but then as Deepa urged me silently on the thought slipped from my mind. The alleyways and streets were deserted as we passed by closed shops and stalls and hurried through countless junctions and cross roads.

‘How come you know the way Deepa? Have you been here before?’

I asked in bewilderment. Deepa didn't reply only smiled at me as she turned her head and nodded and held her fore finger up to her lips.

Here and there a dog saw us, each time they started to bark, and then seemed to think better of it and slunk away into the shadows again. The silence was broken by the sound of running water as we crossed a bridge over a black and oily river with a fetid smell than ran between rubbish piled on its shores. This was another side to the town than that we had not seen entering it yesterday. Then the road started to climb up the hillside beyond the river and to twist and curve as it made its way up towards the hill crest.

‘Its starting to get light Chandra,’ Deepa whispered to me. ‘Hurry, we must get to the temple before dawn or we will not be able to go where I want to show you.’

‘Shouldn't we wait and get the others first?’ I asked.

‘No Chandra, I want us to find the way first. Come on, dearest.’

So we pressed ahead, trees and copses started to line the way mixed in with the houses and pavilions. We came to a square with a gateway flanked by statues of rampant lions and what seemed to be signs in a script I did not recognise. It looked oriental, but I couldn't place it. Then there was a flight of steps that led up a hill side amidst pine trees interspersed with bamboo thickets. I saw the pale moon behind some withered twigs that hung off an old weeping willow tree. The steps were steeper now and on each side rows of terracotta statues of guardian deities stood. They were dressed in long coats that reached almost to their boots and their faces had long drooping moustaches which matched the pony tails that flowed down their backs.

‘How much further Deepa?’ I asked beginning to feel puffed at the exertion of the climb.

‘Almost there Chandra, see up ahead the green jade gateway? It is the entrance to the autumn moon festival pagoda.’

I looked up and saw that we were just approaching an octagonal platform on which stood a multi-storey pagoda. It had balconies of red lacquered wood around it and bamboo screens across its windows and doors. The sky was lightening in the east as Deepa's incessant pulling on my arm drew me into a doorway in a low dark building to one side. We slipped silently down a long sloping approach alleyway and came to a great red, gold and green painted doorway. On each side there

were figures of golden dragons engraved intertwined with what looked like jade pillars.

Deepa pushed on the great doors and they silently slid open. Inside we found ourselves in a courtyard. At its centre was a pool with a little arched bridge running over it. The scene was lit by lanterns in the form of little pagodas set amidst tufts of bamboo and round river stones. In one area the ground was covered in neatly raked sand which had been lovingly made to resemble a delightfully shaped beach it seemed. I didn't know what to make of all this, what kind of a temple was this? Where were all the images I expected to see in a temple in the mountains? Why were we here? How did Deepa know where to go? I began to feel a profound sense of unease.

Deepa stopped, the soft silk of her quilted jacket brushed against my hands, she held up her arm and pointed at a doorway. The long sleeves from her dress hung down and revealed her ivory coloured wrists.

'Behold Chandra, the entrance to the secret way!' So saying she produced a complex jade key from her pocket and inserted it into a hole in a round panel behind the bamboo garden. She turned the key and the panel slid back to reveal a passage way sloping down into the ground.

'What is this Deepa? Where does the tunnel lead?'

'Come with me and see Chandra.'

I followed her down the passage and after a few feet it opened out into a chamber where to our right was sitting a kind of low car in front of another tunnel entrance. It was made it seemed of jade and gilt and had silken seats in it decorated with roundel designs that were a slightly different shade from the body of the fabric.

'What on earth is this Deepa?'

'It is the carriage of the autumn moon, it can carry us two away to the further shore of this mountain chain. It is made for two only Chandra. Why don't we take it and escape to our freedom and leave behind the others?'

'Deepa!' I shrank back, 'What are you saying?' I looked at the carriage, she was right it was made for two only.

'How can you talk of leaving the others? What about Champa and Chopra, Radhika and Uravashi, don't you think they will worry about us if we disappear?'

‘Chandra, don’t fret, we can come back and get them later if we need to, let’s go together now, come with me now, you won’t get another chance like this for millennia. Come on Chandra you must side with me!’

She glared at me and her eyes sparkled green in the darkness. Her hands on mine tightened their grip and I felt her long nails biting into my flesh.

I pulled away from her and stepped back a pace, ‘No Deepa this is not right, none of it is, what are you talking about? What do you mean “you must side with me”. We are on the same side to begin with.’

‘Chandra, I am losing my patience,’ Deepa growled and stood up straight suddenly seeming to look even taller than I remembered her.

‘Obey my command, look into my eyes and say that you will be mine.’

‘Deepa, what has possessed you? I will do no such thing. I am going back to get the others and then we can all sort out what is going on here.’

I started to turn as Deepa lunged at me, her fingernails raked my cheek as she shrieked.

‘Damn you Chandra, if I can’t have you, go back to your worthless friends, you are nothing but a running dog at the beck and call of your mistress!’

She spat at my face and shoved me in the chest knocking all the breath from my body and pushing me backwards. I fell, thinking I would hit the ground, but instead found myself falling down some kind of a shaft. As I fell I struggled, but I could not stop myself falling, I could not stop the wounds from her fingernails on my cheek bleeding, the warm blood trickled to my lips and I tasted the bittersweet flavour of my own blood. The spit on my skin started to burn and seemed to eat away my flesh and I descended into a searing maelstrom of agony and blacked out.

‘Chandra? Are you okay?’ Gopika’s voice? I opened my eyes. I was in bed, in the room I had fallen asleep in.

‘Gopika, what time is it?’

‘Its about seven o’clock in the evening, you have slept all day but I thought maybe you should wake up and come and have dinner with us and talk about our plans for the morning.’

Gopika reached over and put her hand on my brow.

‘You are covered in sweat Chandra, and even though we put salve on you it looks as if you have burns on your face and your skin is peeling.’

I shivered. What kind of a nightmare had that been?

Deepa came into the room and hurried over and rested her hand on mine.

‘Chandra, did you have a nightmare? Tell me about it, maybe if you tell me about it the distress will not seem so bad. What happened in your dream?’

I smiled at her wanly, how could I tell her?

I said, ‘Deepa, it was nothing, I can’t remember what I dreamt.’

Lakrihat Lodge: 5/10/2645 06:35

The next morning we set off at first light. The others had all agreed with me that no time should be lost.

‘Champa, when exactly will your Dakini sisters who will guide us through the mountains meet us? You said last night they would meet us on the way. When?’

‘Deepa, I cannot say exactly when, that is not the way of the Dakinis who guard the mountain passes, it is not in their nature to reveal where they live or arrange meetings beforehand.’ She looked at me with a serious expression on her face.

‘They are not, how can I put this, as playful as Yakshis, we are all wild at heart, but whereas our hearts are full of the gentleness of the forests their hearts are wild like the mountains themselves.’

‘Will we be safe then?’ I asked feeling worried.

‘Quite safe, they recognise their kinship with us and will treat us, and you as our guests, as honoured guests, have no fear on that score.’

We left the city behind before the sun rose and as we skirted a great lake the first rose coloured clouds appeared bright above its waters. Then we rounded a bend in the road and the sun rose, a great red ball slowly climbing into the heavens above. By its light the pine trees were lit by a golden glow and I looked at my companions. Chandra seemed to have still the weight of the journey on his shoulders and I recognised a haunted look in his eyes that seemed to mirror my own disquiet after my nightmare. Chopra’s step was as jaunty as ever, but still there was a certain wariness to his bearing that spoke of how he was looking out for danger all the time. Uravashi slogged along the

path, resolute it seemed in her determination to follow the path that duty was leading her on. As for Champa and Gopika, they were in their element it seemed and looked perfectly at home.

‘Deodar Cedar trees, Gopika see how the needles carpet the ground.’ Champa said and breathed in deeply, ‘Ah, feel the fresh tang of the forest air in your lungs, does it not make you feel truly alive in a way that no human habitations ever really can?’

‘Sister, the forest is my soul, how can my heart not rejoice? Champa, the trees may be of another habitat zone, but they are as welcoming to me as those in our home forests.’ Gopika seemed to glow with delight in the morning sun.

‘The sap rises up in me in empathy with you sister.’ Champa said stopping for a moment and embracing a Cedar tree as if greeting an old friend. I realised I was not sure if she was speaking to Gopika, or perhaps the tree itself she was hugging.

Their joy was infectious it seemed and filled our footsteps with vitality as we began to climb the hills. At first we were climbing up narrow footpaths between terraced fields. The barley crop had just been harvested and here and there the sheaves of straw were being gathered into haystacks by the mountain’s inhabitants.

Gradually the climb became steeper, the terraces gave way to wild slopes and our path grew harder as we wound our way up the hill side. I glanced back from a switch back bend in the path and saw the city gleaming in the morning sun beyond the glittering waters of the lake. In the distance I could see the brilliant white shapes of two stupas. One the stupa at Khudmauzood on a far hill crest and the other in orchards to the West of the city, the great dome of Jineshvara stupa. Even from here I could see the golden parasols on its topmost peak gleaming in the bright sunlight.

‘Slow down Gopika!’ Chopra said, huffing and puffing as he struggled to keep up with the light footed object of his affections.

She glanced back and giggled, ‘Mr Chopra I do declare that you seem to find it hard to keep up with me.’ So saying she dashed forward and ran up the path ahead and turned back at the next bend and called back.

‘Come on Mr slow coach Chopra, not so far now to a place to rest a while and take our breakfast. But hurry or I will eat all the food before you catch me!’ She ran round the bend and disappeared.

Champa frowned, 'Seems the sap is going to her head.'

I laughed and said, 'if only we could all feel as light at heart.'

Uravashi looked up the hill and said, 'what I want to know is how far is breakfast from here? I'm famished.'

Champa changed her pace so she was walking beside her and said.

'Not far now Uravashi, we will stop at a little temple to the goddess on the hill crest up ahead amidst these Cedar trees and break our fast.'

So we walked on, the pine needles on the path beneath our feet seemed to exude a delicious fresh scent as they crackled under our footsteps and I was so involved in savouring the taste of the mountain air that I hardly noticed the climb as I walked.

'At last!' Gopika cried out spotting us as we rounded a bend and came to a patch of green grass and stacks of the barley straw next to a simple building like a stone hut.

'I seem to have been waiting for ages for you all.'

She bore in her hands garlands of red flowers, rhododendron blooms it seemed, and she placed a garland over each of our necks as we left the path and sat down on the straw stacks beside the building. For a moment I felt a wave of tiredness come over me and I blinked and then I heard.

'Welcome to Nandinidevi's temple travellers,' said an old woman who emerged from the shadows in the entrance to the building.

'Enter and make offerings if you would to the goddess to wish for safe passage on your long journey.'

'Deepa?' Champa gazed at me. I nodded and taking from my pack some fruit and puffed rice from my breakfast ration I handed them to her and entered the building. For an image of the goddess they got by with a rough stone set into the back wall and smeared with red vermilion.

Gopika offered flowers to the goddess.

Chopra offered incense that he produced from his pack.

Uravashi offered water she poured from her bottle into a bowl.

Champa offered the fruit and two small bowls of rice.

I offered a candle which I lit and put on the altar before the goddess.

The soft voice of the old woman behind us spoke.

'Two small bowls of rice, offered with a pure heart, no blame.'

I turned and looked, where the old woman had stood was now standing a young mountain girl who smiled at me. She was dressed in

the manner of the mountain women in a dress that she had tucked up somehow between her legs as if to make a garment a little more like trousers than a skirt. Around her waist was coiled a great length of woollen rope. On her black hair rolled up into coils on either side of her head was perched a cap which featured a geometric design on its peak.

‘Where did the old lady go?’ I asked.

The girl laughed, ‘I am the old lady, the mother and the maiden, all at once.’ She winked at Champa, ‘can’t your friends recognise a Dakini when they meet one?’

Champa shook her head, ‘No and neither can we it seems, sister, I am Champa, what is your name?’

‘You may call me Mohini.’ The Dakini said and gestured to us to come outside. We followed her into the sun and sat on the straw and ate our breakfast, the climb had done wonders for our appetite. As it had done for Rita, who barked and snapped at my heels and demanded I feed her titbits.

‘What an entrancing puppy Deepa, what is her name?’

‘She is called Rita, she is my constant companion Mohini.’

‘Why did you bring her on such a hazardous journey as this? Surely a puppy belongs at home, not on the hard road through the mountains.’

Mohini said fixing me with a puzzled gaze and glancing at the dog.

‘Oh Mohini, I swear I had not the heart to leave her behind, I feel as if she is more dear to me than anything, isn’t she enchanting?’

Mohini reached out to pat Rita and Rita growled at her.

‘Enchanting yes, but not enchanted by me it seems.’ Mohini laughed and passed on quickly to other matters.

‘The way ahead is hard and dangerous. There are Asura patrols we must avoid if we are to cross safely. Not to mention the simple dangers of the high mountains. So rest a while and restore your strength for a moment in the sun. By nightfall we must climb to the alpine meadow at Ilaqa.

The sun was high above us as we set off again refreshed up the path. It turned into a never ending switch back trail that wound its way up under the green canopy of a red rhododendron bushes. A deep silence settled over the landscape as we climbed.

‘Can you see the city from here?’ I asked Mohini when we came to a ridge where the path left the forest for a moment and followed a line of crags.

Mohini smiled, her teeth gleamed white in the sun and her eyes glittered.

‘The city is hidden from us now by the foot hills, behold.’

She gestured off to our right.

The hills descended in sweeping curves and ranges cloaked in a green mantle to where they seemed to descend endlessly. Beyond the Lakrihat valley we could see the foot hills that separated it from the plains.

The vista was vast and took my breath away. Mohini’s voice broke the spell.

‘But now you can also see the peaks of the Shvetalaya range, behold.’

She waved her hand and it was as if she had suddenly conjured up a new vision. Mighty snow laden peaks and summits that marched along the skyline. Black rocks and white snow against a brilliant azure sky.

I shook my head, ‘How can we cross such peaks?’

Mohini laughed, ‘sister this is but the first range, beyond it we must travel to the great mountains. Don’t worry, I will lead you to your destiny.’

I felt subdued by her words and simply set one foot front of the other as we walked endlessly up the path.

‘Deepa,’ Chandra asked matching his step with me as we walked along a broader section of the path. ‘Why did you bring that dam dog with you it keeps barking at everything. Its a dratted nuisance, can’t we leave it at some place on the journey ahead and get it when we come back?’

‘Chandra, what a thing to say!’ I raised my eyebrows and regarded him with suspicion. ‘Its not like you to say such things, I will hear no more of it.’

I heard no more for the path turned a corner and I saw that its character was about to change utterly. Ahead we were entering a rocky valley where great cliffs leapt from the depths below to the heights above.

‘Look there are vultures circling up ahead.’ Chopra cried and pointed up ahead where the path became a narrow ledge that cut across the cliff ahead.

‘Not vultures, eagles Mr Chopra,’ Mohini said and added.

‘Take care now the way is narrow here and a wrong step will cost you dearly.’

I looked down, far below our feet a mountain torrent was rushing down a precipitate path to the plains below.

We picked our way gingerly along the path which was now little more than a rocky ledge that ran along the cliffs towards the dark recesses of the head of the valley.

We drew near to the stream which was intersecting the path and as we turned a corner in the crooked way saw the passage across the stream for the first time. Two ropes. One tied higher than another. That was the way across the stream.

‘Rum do,’ Chopra said standing where the ropes were tied off to a tree.

‘Is this the only way across, my it must be hundreds of feet from these ropes down to the stream below even here, one slip and...’

‘One slip and your dead Mr Chopra.’ Mohini said decisively, ‘that is the way here for you all.’

‘Faint heart never won victory,’ said Uravashi and began to edge her way out along the ropes, gradually inch by inch she passed across the chasm. Likewise Gopika and Champa who moved as if automatically, like remote controlled figures across. Chandra crossed without trouble.

‘Deepa, how are you going to carry your dog?’ Mohini asked.

‘He cannot cross by the rope way, you must leave him here.’

I glared at her, ‘I am not leaving Rita, its not a problem I will just sit her down on top of my pack and tie her down to it.’

Mohini shrugged and left me to do that as she quickly shimmied across the rope way.

It was no problem to get Rita to sit half in and half on my pack and tie her in, she even seemed to co-operate and licked my hand and looked affectionately at me.’

‘There Rita, I will not abandon you whatever that wild mountain woman wants. Don’t worry.’

Rita gave a happy yelp and settled into the pack as I swung it onto my back. I set my foot on the rope way and found that it was strangely easy to cross over.

‘We have still got a long way to go today so lets press on.’ Mohini said when I got to the other side. So despite the fact we were all getting tired we pressed on. The path returned to being a narrow ledge along the cliff, only now it rose up it as well and as we breasted the outward sweep of the ridge that formed the further margin of the valley. Then we came to an area where the rocks were loose and crumbly and it was clear that we would have to pick our way with care or fall to our deaths below.

That was our mistake, we didn’t think to keep an eye out above.

Without warning a titanic rumbling filled the air and pebbles and boulders began bouncing past us as they careened down the cliff.

‘Landslide!’ I cried in horror and tried to plaster myself to the cliff face.

‘Deepa!’ I looked up as I heard Chandra’s cry and gazed in horror as I saw a great boulder crashing down from above that fell onto the area where the leaders of our group were. As it did so the path collapsed under their feet.

I could not believe my eyes, Uravashi, Chopra, Chandra, Gopika, Champa, all were falling, falling, tumbling with the rocks down the cliff.

Their screams rent the air and tore my heart apart. I was petrified and couldn’t move dumb struck with horror.

Moments later silence filled the valley. I stared down the cliff, hundreds and hundreds of feet below rocks were piled up in a scree slope that ran down over another ledge and then everything was hidden from view. Beyond that all I could see was the forest canopy far, far below.

‘Deepa, I am so sorry, even I a Dakini cannot protect travellers from such accidents, it was a million one to chance that a landslide should come down as we crossed here. I am so sorry.’

‘Can we climb down and look for them? Maybe they are injured and we can help.’ I thought of their bodies falling in the rock slide and knew I was holding onto a false hope even as I spoke.

‘No Deepa, they have fallen from the way, they are lost, even we know no way to climb down right here. We could backtrack and take

another route that leads up the valley floor. But it would take days to get to the place where they have fallen. I fear that there would be nothing there either by the time we got there.'

'What do you mean?'

'The eagles, wolves, and jackals of the mountains would beat us to the spot, no they are now sacrifices to the gods of the mountains and we must celebrate their passing.'

So saying she turned to the valley and raising her arms began to make a strange ululating sound with her voice that filled the whole of space it seemed with a strange harmony. I would not like to say if it sounded more like a cry of mourning or victory. My already chilled heart quaked at hearing it.

Rita licked at my ear and her hot breath on my neck distracted me. I patted her and smiled. 'So its just us two eh? Well, at least I have you for company.' I glanced over at Mohini, 'And a Dakini for a guide, so everything is not lost, but my heart is broken Rita, how can I live now? It is as if the moon has fallen from the sky for me, leaving me alone in a long dark night.' I shivered and then shook my head. 'Faint heart never won victory,' I shall honour Uravashi's last words by pressing on I decided.

Mohini was watching me closely and when she saw me turn to the direction we had been going she smiled.

'Good, I was afraid you might spend forever deciding what to do, come on there is no time to waste we must cross where the landslide has damaged the path it will not be easy. Here take an end of my rope and you and I shall be roped together so that if one falls the other may save them, or we will both die and be sisters in death.'

Grim words and grim thoughts filled my mind as we edged our way over the damaged section of the track. But we made it though and carried on. Ironically almost immediately afterwards the path struck back across a wider slope and we began to walk through a spacious alpine meadow. Wild flowers decorated the scene. I stopped. Mohini had to stop as well due to the rope.

'Why have you stopped, we cannot dawdle here Deepa.'

'I am going to gather flowers to offer to my companions.'

'What! A lovely sentiment but hardly the time or place. Don't be ridiculous. This is a dangerous spot Asuras sometimes come here.'

‘No Mohini it won’t take long we can make some daisy chains, see the lovely daisies in this meadow, then we can go back and its just around the corner after all and offer the garlands at the landslide. The blossoms will perhaps fall onto the bodies of my friends as my final offering.’

‘More just a garnish for the jackals,’ hissed Mohini.

But I wouldn’t be stopped and began to pick flowers intending to make garlands to offer for my companions safe passage to their next lives. Rita jumped out of my pack and I untied her. She turned to Mohini and started to growl and bark incessantly.

‘Deepa you must hush that dog, this is an area the Asuras patrol, they may hear its barking and then we are done for.’

She advanced on the dog, carrying a stone in her hands.

‘What are you doing!’ I shrieked, don’t you touch a hair on her head. I swept Rita up in my arms and glared at Mohini.

Mohini seemed to loose patience with me all of a sudden and screamed out.

‘Stubborn stupid woman, picking flipping flowers for your friends while the day wastes away. A smelly mutt that you won’t be separated from and I can’t figure out where it came from either.’ She shook her head. What did she mean she couldn’t figure out where Rita came from?

I didn’t have long to ponder this as she began to bellow out loud and say something which chilled my bones.

‘Come on down Zhu and Huiling! I have given up with this one let’s shoot her now and get it over with.’

‘What are you saying Mohini? Are you summoning Asura guards? Why?’

She spat on the ground at her feet and barked at me.

‘Dakini? Can’t recognise a Dakini? Not surprising you didn’t recognise me as one, I am no Dakini, my name is Vera Chang, I am your nemesis Deepa and now I am going to have you killed.’

‘Vera Chang? Donald Chang’s husband, you again? You were in my nightmare, how come you are here?’

She gave me no answer but cackled and laughed as two men dressed as Chinese soldiers from a former age came up. They were wearing felt jackets and caps and had long boots on. In their hands they carried

what looked like a weapon I believe is called a musket. I had seen once in a museum once.

‘Kill her now, I am bored with her she will not co-operate.’ Vera said to them as they approached us in a disinterested tone as if the matter was now over for her.

‘Foreign Devil!’ The elder of the two said and pointed his gun in our direction. ‘Yes, yes, she’s a foreign devil I know, bloody Indian, go on finish her off.’

The elder turned and looked at Vera, ‘No, she is no devil she is a follower of the Way, you are the devil dressed in the body of our kinswoman. We are the spirits of Vera’s ancestors and you profane our traditions by impersonating her. It is you who are a foreign devil!’

Vera stared at them in astonishment and her eyes flashed, ‘You dare oppose me? Do you know who I am? Ancestor spirits, I spit on your graves I care nothing for your honour I am above such concerns. So Vera you are trying to thwart me and manifesting in my illusions your opposition to me? If you will not kill her I shall kill you all, this is all getting very boring.’

I was getting confused, why was she talking about herself as if she was not herself? But the ancestor spirits were not confused at all. They pulled the triggers on their muskets and with a puff of smoke the body of Vera was struck directly at close range. But instead of falling to the ground rather I saw an expression of surprise and rage cross her features and moments later it seemed that a blinding light began to fill my vision and drive my consciousness from my mind.

I blinked. I was sitting on a bale of straw outside the temple on the path. I fell to the ground and wept. My tears were for mixed emotions. All at once deep grief at how I could have suffered so much in the blink of an eye, and joy that Chandra was trying to comfort me. While Chopra, Gopika, Uravashi and Champa were all gathered around me trying to figure out how to help me.

‘Deepa, Deepa, what is wrong?’ Chandra said lifting me up and cradling my head on his chest as he held me close to him.

‘What happened? We have just sat down what troubles you that you weep so?’

I sobbed and gradually as I clung to him my tears flowed and washed away my grief. I looked at Champa and Chandra and said.

‘How can I begin to explain?’

‘Start at the beginning, its a good way generally,’ Chopra said.

I nodded, Chopra often spoke the truth when you least expected.

So that is what I did, I told them of the nightmare on the bus and then of the nightmare I had just endured in the blink of an eye. As they listened worried expressions crossed their faces. Darkest of all was the look on Chandra’s face. When I finished he said.

‘Deepa, there is something I must tell you to, although I find it hard to tell this to you all, especially you, do not think ill of me for it.’

Then he told of his dream in the Lakrihat Lodge.

I was shocked, but as I looked at him I recognised that it held at least one truth which was dear to my heart. I bore no grudge against him for his actions in the dream and to show him this I embraced him with my arms as I sat leaning against him.

Champa and Gopika had been silent up until that moment but then they broke their silence. Champa spoke first.

‘This is bad, very bad, we are crossing paths with some power which we are not familiar with. Clearly we must take great care from now on. How to distinguish between illusion and reality, we must all look for the inconsistencies in what occurred and seek to understand how if such an illusion comes upon us we can distinguish it from reality.’

Gopika spoke, ‘one thing strikes me, Vera is not Vera, there is a mystery in a mystery here, just as there have been dreams in dreams. Nor yet was Deepa Deepa in Chandra’s dream.’

‘Seems to me that nobody was who they seemed to be in Deepa’s nightmare just now.’ Chopra said then added, ‘And what was this dog you had Deepa? Have you ever had a dog called Rita, I don’t recall you mentioning such a pet. Did you have a pet dog when you were a child perhaps?’

‘No Chopra, that’s the strange thing, I have never kept a dog in my life.’

‘What of the border guards who turned out to be ancestor spirits?’

Chandra asked and then added.

‘In my dream too there were I see now many Chinese elements, as there was in your nightmare Deepa on the bus. There is something about Vera in these nightmare visions, but it seems that the Vera element in the nightmares is not always co-operating with the other parts now.’

‘Friends,’ I said, ‘I think we must all ponder this deeply, but for now let us continue our journey we must climb these mountains somehow.’

We all agreed that staying put made no sense, and I didn’t want to stay where I had had this nightmare vision one iota longer than needed.

Just before we left I looked into the shrine of the goddess. What I saw only added to my confusion. In front of an image of the goddess Parvati were a number of offerings: flowers, recently burnt incense sticks, fruit, a bowl of water, two bowls of rice and a burned out candle. I shivered and turned away.

We walked in silence up through the rhododendron forest. Only now I saw that it was not the season for the red flowers to bloom. It was a sombre and dark and foreboding forest into which we were marching.

None of us felt much like speaking, we did not know what to say, or how to say it, perhaps we even began to doubt who we were speaking to. So we just walked on through the dark forest. Gradually the trunks and branches became cloaked in moss and lichen and it became as if they were covered with veils of trailing rags as the afternoon drew on.

With a profound sense of relief I sensed as I looked up eventually that we might be drawing near the end of the dark forest for up ahead there was a lightness amidst the foliage. For now amidst the trees there were great boulders and crags hidden amongst their boughs and trunks.

Next moment the path finally made a sharp turn to our left and rose over what at first I thought was a ridge. Then I saw it was actually a broad alpine meadow that we were entering.

The mood of depression seemed to lift as we left the dark silent dank depths of the forest. The sky opened up above us into a great canopy of blue over our heads and on the horizon I could see the mountains. They were the same mountains I had seen in my vision, but they seemed somehow welcoming now. Fresh blue and white crests, not black and white fangs.

‘Feel the breeze in your hair!’ Gopika cried as she spun round on the spot and twirled her arms in the air and her hair flung out all around her.

I shook my head and laughed at the sight. It lifted my spirits and so it seemed the mood we all had felt passed as we passed beyond the

forest. Flowers, yellow, white and mauve blooms, grew in profusion all around scattered amidst the mosses and grasses of the meadow land.

‘And smell the air Gopika, its so fresh.’ Champa said as she strode up to Gopika and caught her hand and brought her spinning to a stop.

I breathed in deeply and felt the sense of tiredness lift from heart.

Under the late afternoon sun we walked across the meadow while the clouds flitted along in the blue sky. Our feet were as light again as the clouds in the sky. Then we came to a stretch of rolling land where boulders littered the landscape. We walked down a slight bowl shaped depression in the hillside and entered what seemed to be kind of circle of rough stones and boulders.

‘Well, Champa at last, what kept you and your companions? Don’t tell me Gopika kept dawdling? Or was it your human friends who know not the way of walking in the mountains?’

I looked in incredulity at the origin of this speech.

Sitting on a boulder cleaning her toe nails with a strange s shaped serrated edged knife was an extraordinary vision. She must have been at least nine feet tall I imagined if she were to stand up. Her skin was as black as ebony, her hair as red as the robin’s breast, her teeth as white as the gull’s wing. For clothing she chose only a tiger skin wrapped around her loins, her breasts were as plain to see as the strange jewellery which she wore around her neck. She had a very questionable taste in ornaments, a necklace of animal skulls, earrings of something I didn’t care to even speculate on what it was, and the most odd belt I have ever seen. Outside of a butcher’s shop that is. She had woven around her waist a mesh of knives, scalpels, scrapers, pincers and gouges too many to count, to ghastly to linger over looking at. Her only other possession seemed to be a cup strung on a thread from her left shoulder. I realised looking at it in horror that it was made from a skull.

The figure saw my petrified gaze and laughed, ‘Have no fear daughter of a good family, we too honour and revere the teacher, his teachings and the community of his followers. We are not savages.’

‘What, what? What are all those... things...’ I stuttered, lost for words.

The figure frowned and held up the knife, 'This? Why this is my flaying knife, all Dakinis carry one, we slice away ignorance with it and cut to the quick.' She smiled.

'But I would know your name sons and daughters of good family so that I can invite you to share an evening meal and rest with me. My name is Bhakti, and yours sister?'

'Deepa.'

'And yours?'

'Chandra.'

'Brother?'

'Mr Yash Chopra, pleased to meet you "Mrs" Bhakti.'

Bhakti smiled, 'That is "Miss" actually, rare is the man who can tame a Dakini. And you?' She turned to Uravashi.

'Miss Uravashi Bajpai, a pleasure to meet you Miss Bhakti.'

Bhakti stood up, I had been wrong about her height, she must have been at least ten foot tall if not more.

'So Champa, Gopika, Deepa, Chandra, Chopra, Uravashi, welcome to my meadow garden and you must accept my hospitality for the night before we take the pass through the snows on the morrow.'

So saying she strode off at what to her I expect was a slow stroll, but for the rest of us was almost a jog. Her long legs seemed to stride across the land as if she more flew than walked.

We rounded a bend in the path and saw a flock of mountain sheep and goats ahead. Bhakti turned her head back towards us and said.

'These are some of my flock I am fattening them on these seasonal meadows now to withstand the winter's rigours. But even so not all will survive the snows of the dark days of winter.'

She paused seeming to assess which was stronger and which weaker.

'One at least must be a sacrifice for the safety of the flock.'

So saying she changed from words to action. If before she had seemed to be but loping to us, now she was a jaguar pouncing on its prey, in an instant she leaped across the hundreds of yards that separated us from the flock. As if it were a single step for her. She disappeared from sight for a fraction of a second and then her head rose up from amidst the flock. In her mouth she held a ram by the neck as a cat holds a sparrow in her teeth that it brings in to the house in the morning as an offering to its owner. So too did Bhakti lope

back across the field and drop the ram's carcass at our feet and reveal a bloody smile on her milk white teeth. She said in a low growl.

'Do not think the ram's sacrifice of its life is in vain. We must offer a portion to the goddess of the mountains to beg for safe passage or we cannot cross her lands. And of course, whatever she leaves behind we may feast on tonight.'

There were a few raised eyebrows amongst us. In particular Uravashi who was a strict vegetarian, seemed more shocked than impressed. But even so we trooped along behind Bhakti to her home.

Her dwelling turned out to be something which was a cross between a cave and a hut, it was made from huge boulders and earth half set into and half emerging from the hillside. You would never even have known it was there unless you were looking for it, or had it pointed out to you as we did.

I walked over the threshold and saw a welcoming fire in the hearth and dropped my pack against the wall and sank down onto the ground. It seemed an oasis of warmth and security in the maelstrom of events we were caught up in. We sat in a circle against the walls, leaning against our packs and listening to the wind picking up speed outside, but feeling safe and warm in Bhakti's home.

The use which Bhakti put her vast collection of knives to was revealed in a gory instant or two when with mathematical precision it seemed she carved the ram into portions stuck them on skewers and placed them on the fire to roast. I have always thought it would be a good idea to be a vegetarian, but the smell of roast lamb on an empty stomach is an argument for eating meat I find hard to resist.

Later I sat with a whole haunch it seemed of roast lamb in my hands and as I savoured the smell and taste I felt alive. Perhaps the cat side of my personality was purring inside some dark recess of my soul where it dwelt. It certainly felt like that. In fact as my teeth bit into the tender flesh and the juices ran down my cheek I looked at Chandra sitting on the other side of the hearth likewise tucking into his portion. I licked my lips and I knew what I wanted, but how? In a small hut, all of us crowded together. I gazed around in disgust and disappointment and saw Uravashi picking at a handful of nuts and raisins she had retrieved from her backpack. To get to them she had had to take the tent out of her pack. Of course, I cursed myself, we all

carried micro light weight tents, big enough for one, or two in a crush?

I put down the meat and walked around the fire and whispered in Chandra's ear. He listened, looked up at me and nodded and smiled. Without a word we picked up his pack and went outside. The others didn't comment, but I noticed that Champa smiled at Gopika and winked as we went out the door.

Outside the rain was threatening to begin any moment. We pitched the tent on a green sward near the hut facing towards the mountains. We sat for a few moments as the clouds swirled around the mountain peaks. The last of the sunlight from the sun set still lit the topmost peaks in a rose and gold glow and banks of carmine and scarlet clouds lined the horizon. Like a gold and crimson veil drawn over our senses.

We turned from the panorama and shimmied inside the tent and closed the door flap. I straddled Chandra and looked down into his brown eyes. He gazed back up at me with the sweetest expression on his face.

Suddenly a wave of doubt came over me. Was this real or an illusion, was this Chandra, or the enchantress? How could I know? I ran my hands through his hair and down his body, tracing the outlines of his chest and the form of his sides. He certainly seemed real.

'What's wrong Deepa? Is this too soon for you? Should we stop now, I don't want....' I hushed him by first placing my right fore finger on his lips and moving my head down so I could whisper into his ears.

'No Chandra, its not that, hold me tight, I want to know you are real and not illusion, that is all.'

Chandra smiled and held me tight as we sank down into each others bodies the storm outside broke and the rains lashed the tent. I took no notice. I felt Chandra's body beneath me and I knew whether or not what I was feeling with my senses was real or not, did not matter in the end. The only thing that mattered was that the feeling of love in my heart was real.

In the morning the meadow plateau was covered in a mantle of dense fog and nothing could be seen that was more than a few feet away. The silence was palpable. The only thing that made a sound as we slowly emerged from the tent was a flight of ravens that came swooping down over us. Their wings beat the air like a rushing drum

roll as they passed over head and veered off towards the mountains. We packed up the tent and I hoped we might be able to slip back into the hut while everybody still slept, without having to say anything to anyone.

As we entered the hut I saw that my hope were not to be directly fulfilled. Uravashi was wandering around the hut and pointing her scanner at everything and carefully studying the read outs.

‘What are you doing Uravashi?’ I asked, my curiosity aroused.

‘Deepa, glad to see you, I have worked out how to determine if things are real, why don’t we use our scanners? I have checked most of the hut and it all seems real.’ Suddenly she pointed it at me and peered at the readout.

‘Ah, and you are the real Deepa as well, thank goodness, now where is that Bhakti woman?’ She started to walk towards the doorway.

Chopra coughed, ‘Uravashi, your theory is good, but it has a flaw, your readings show what is real according to the scanner, but there is a problem.’

Uravashi turned round and stared at him, a look of concern in her eyes.

‘What problem?’

‘What if the scanner is an illusion? And the scanner data an illusion?’

‘Ooo!’ Uravashi stamped her foot and slumped down on her pack.

‘What was I thinking of, of course, there is no way to tell what is real or not.’

‘Yes there is,’ I said emphatically. They all looked at me.

‘True you cannot tell if what you feel with your senses is real, but I know that what you feel in your heart is real.’

‘Is that so daughter of a good family?’ Bhakti said as she bent down and came into the hut.

‘So now you are saying you can only trust your heart and not your head?’

I nodded. She looked at me and laughed.

‘But can you always trust your heart? How can you know what it is really saying to you?’ She shook her head.

I didn’t reply, in my heart I knew that I was right.

‘Enough, even endless speculation will not get us over the eternally snow laden passes today, we must get ready and set off.’ Bhakti said.

We packed up rations of the cold cuts to take with us and slung our packs onto our backs and set off up the mountain. The mists were parting as we made our way from the meadow into the littoral zone that marked the topmost limits of the climax vegetation of the area. Now patches of bare stone were decorated only by clumps of low succulent plants and red and yellow lichen bloomed on the grey boulders and crags.

‘Quiet, all of you, stay still,’ Bhakti said in a whisper and pointed off to our left. There not a hundred metres away on a rock sat a great brown bear and at its feet two cubs gambolled around. We watched entranced for a moment this scene of simple family life in the wilds of the mountains, and then Bhakti gestured up the path and we crept as silently as possible past the scene. Just before I lost sight of the bears the mother seemed to look up and stare directly at me. I don’t know if bears can smile. But I could have sworn she did.

After a while the path became another switch back trail only now it was traversing the slopes of a great barren rock scree where even the lichen did not seem to be able to gain a foothold. I had been thinking about our predicament in my head as we walked and I matched pace with Champa and said.

‘Champa, I have realised something, maybe the problem of how to distinguish reality from illusion is even greater than it first seemed.’

‘Why do you say that sister?’ Champa whispered.

‘The more the illusion maker knows we are aware of them the more the illusion maker changes things so that they don’t fit our ideas of what might be an illusion.’

‘So even if there are no dogs, no Chinese landscapes, no Vera Chang: maybe it is all still an illusion?’

‘Champa, maybe you are an illusion, maybe you are the enchantress.’

Champa shook her head, ‘Not I, you Deepa, tricking me with new theories on how to distinguish reality from illusion, or not as the case may be.’

She sighed and continued, ‘My teacher Fuji Guru, may he rest in peace, told me that everything that comes and goes is not real, it is just constant wandering, samsara, and everything in samsara is but...’

She didn’t finish her utterance but suddenly her eyes lit up and she called out.

‘All of you stop a moment, we know our enemy now, she has revealed herself.’

‘What is this?’ Bhakti said, ‘be quick this place is prone to rock slides, it is a scree slope, what is so vital that now it needs to be spoken?’

Champa looked around and said, ‘Maya, I know that one or all of you are Maya, the enchantress, she who holds gods and men under her sway.’

I nodded, that was it, we were crossing swords with a deity who even outfoxed the gods sometimes.

‘But now we recognise you Maya, we know it is you Maya who are flashing your eyes at us.’

‘What good does knowing this do us?’ Chopra said, ever pragmatic.

‘To know your enemy is the first step to knowing how to deal with them.’ Bhakti intoned in a solemn voice. ‘Good, we are making progress, but come on now, it is progress to the pass that concerns me as your guide.’

So we climbed on above the scree slope and entered the snowfields.

The way grew steep and perilous and our clothing began to seem hardly adequate for the conditions. Again it was Uravashi who remembered what was needed.

‘Turn on your suit environmental controls folks, this is like EVA on a barely habitable planet.’

She spoke the truth, the sunlight was more like black light than white light. It reflected on the snowfields and was too bright for unshielded eyes. I turned on my visor and it manifested around my head and the UV filters cut in adjusting the conditions to something more suitable to humans.

‘What of you Champa?’ I asked concerned for the Yakshis’ well being. They had no suit environmental logistics to support them. She turned her face and gazed into my eyes and I noticed a peculiar lustre to her features.

‘It is as cold as a moonless winter’s night in Magadh bathing in the Neranjana river to wash away our sins, this much we Yakshis can stand with ease.’

Gopika shook her head, ‘Don’t worry Deepa even if it gets colder still, even were the air thin to a vacuum, we have some tricks, not up our sleeves, but in the jewellery on our arms.’ So saying she

touched one of her bangles on her upper arm and a translucent white force field glowed around her body shaping itself to her soft contours.

‘Probably more comfortable than your suits I reckon to!’

I smiled and glanced ahead to where Bhakti led the way.

It seemed pointless to ask if she, virtually naked as she was, was having trouble with the cold, she was obviously in her element.

I though began to find the constant scrambling over rocks difficult, as did the others and when we came to what seemed to be virtually a sheer face of ice hundreds of feet high that blocked our path I stared up in incomprehension at it.

‘Guests, this is the great wall that guards the snow kingdoms from the plains. We must link ourselves together by rope and I will lead the way cutting footholds into the ice with my flaying knife as I go.’

Bhakti smiled seeing the look of dismay on all our faces.

‘Have no fear, for a Dakini climbing ice cliffs is as easy as flying in the air.’

And this is meant to reassure us? I thought to myself.

But there was no time for doubts, Bhakti had made sure that we had climbing ropes with us before we left in the morning and we unstowed them from our packs and linked up and began the climb.

I can honestly say that I cannot imagine why anybody would want to climb mountains for fun. It was the most petrifying thing I have ever done. As a police woman I did not lead a sheltered life: I have face armed criminals, struggled with madmen with knives to disarm them, stared into the eyes of men and women who have killed their kith and kin; but still the experience of climbing for what was literally hours up a wall of ice chilled me to the bone.

‘Are your environmental suit logistics functioning?’ I asked Chopra, his teeth were chattering.

‘Yes Deepa they are, it is my psychological state logistics that are not functioning fully I think.’ He grinned, ‘But I will make it.’

His joke warmed my heart.

After an eternity it seemed I found myself climbing not up the cliff face but over its top and standing in a field of ice and snow between yet higher rocky peaks that lined the walls of the valley.

‘Well climbed guests, now that the hard part is done it is but a matter of a simple walk from here down to the valley of Brahmaur and there we can spend the night with my kinsfolk at Bhagalavati hall.’

‘A simple walk?’ I asked staring at the snows and rocky peaks all around.

‘Well fairly simple.’ Bhakti said and led the way ahead. It turned out her idea of a simple walk varied a bit from mine. For me it would be a stroll in a water meadow by willow trees along a gently meandering river on a summer’s afternoon. For her it was hours of pounding trekking along icy stony paths that led along precipices and through narrow places where every moment the rocks seem to threaten to crush us in their iron grip.

But eventually the way passed down into a gentler kind of mountain forest landscape. High plateau alpine meadows, then low wind shaped forests of rhododendron and bamboo, then pine and cedar forests glistening gold in the afternoon sun.

‘Apples!’ Gopika shouted and bounded high enough into the air to grab an apple from a tree as we reached an almost flat area where the forest began to look like orchards.

‘Umm, sweet sun ripened, perfect, here you try a bite!’ She said thrusting it into my hand. I bit into the soft fruit and tasted the distilled essence of sunshine and rain, earth and nutrients, I tasted the very mountains themselves. It was enchanting.

Then I looked down at the apple, at its core was a maggot crawling out a crevice in it.

‘Yeuch,’ I said and indicated the maggot to Gopika who shrugged.

‘Organic eh? No pesticides eh? Nice, give it back to me.’

She carefully took it, bit the portion with the bug in it out into her mouth whole and then spat the mouthful out onto the ground.

‘Bye bye Mr Bug! Have fun.’ She giggled and finished the apple off.

The path now opened up and we found ourselves walking along a field boundary between orchards and corn fields. I could hear birds singing in the forest. The cuckoos’ mellow call, the bell birds’ call and answer, doves gentle murmuring and the cry of a bird which sounded like “Jeeoh! Jeeoh!”.

The path rose up over a low ridge and as we crested it we saw before us a great lake, deep blue water stretching into the distance and beside it fields and a great hall that stood amidst orchards on its shore.

‘That is Bhagalavati?’ I asked in astonishment.

‘Of course.’ Snapped Bhakti.

‘But in Hindustan Bhagalavati was a dusty market town whose only claim to fame was that once a famous poet had lived there for a while.’

‘Your point Deepa?’ Bhakti frowned.

‘I just can’t relate the two image in my head.’

‘Get real honey, this is the real Bhagalavati, yours was just some tin pot version. This is the real Bhagalavati hall on the shores of lake Anavatapta.’

We walked along the pathway, it led us through the green rice fields by way of the narrow built up banks which lined each field. We had to take care in places not to loose our footing on the slippery soil or it would have been easy to end up splashing down into the muddy soil of the flooded paddy fields. I followed Uravashi who was carefully picking her way along the trail with her graceful swaying walk. Even though she was wearing a suit she still walked as if she was clad in a sari at home in Hindustan. The green rice stalks were crowned by the heads of rice grains which were just beginning to set and would be ready I thought for harvesting in another month or two.

I looked up when I heard the sound of new voices.

‘Welcome to Bhagalavati hall, strangers, enter and rest a while.’ We were being met by a group of men dressed in long white shirts and blue check wrap around robes on their lower halves. Around them clustered children in ragged clothes most half naked from the waist downwards, all with expressions of wonder in their eyes at the sight of strangers. From doorways to the huts scattered around the settlement and in amongst the trees and bushes we could also see the faces of women in brilliantly coloured saris peering out curiously at the strangers.

Strangers we were indeed, some stranger than others. Bhakti towered over all of us and her red hair seemed to glow as it were on fire in the bright evening sunlight.

‘We would take rest with you friends for this night before we set of to the passes beyond.’ She said and so saying she strode up the steps to the entrance of the hall and stopped and turned around and addressed us all.

‘Guests, this is the hall of the mountain folk, its door is always open, in it we may rest and feast. Come on enjoy yourself, the evening is yet young and the way ahead is hard. Take this opportunity to relax, there

are few such chances up ahead in the high ice passes of the mountain fastnesses.’

In the hall there were fires burning in great fire places at both ends and in-between them were ranged long wooden tables and benches. The air was full of the scent of food cooking in great cauldrons by the fires and the delicious smell of bread baking in ovens. Here and there groups of people were sitting and drinking from flagons of beverages of some sort. One group near us was dressed in countless layers of wool and felt and each had in front of them cups that seemed to contain barley grains. They were pouring boiling water from kettles onto the grains and then sipping at the resultant concoction through straws. They looked as if they had been there a long while and had no intention of leaving. In a corner of the hall there was a group dressed in long blue and maroon robes who were half sitting and half laying on carpets and cushions and bolsters of rich damask fabrics. They too were lost in enjoyment of some beverage. This they were pouring it seemed from animal skins into metal bowls. It was white in colour and smelt of sour milk and alcohol all at once it seemed. At the further end of the hall from where we had entered was a high table and it was to this that Bhakti strode up and beckoned us to join her.

‘Where shall we put our packs Bhakti?’ Chopra asked.

‘Just keep them with you on the ground, there are no separate rooms in Bhagalavati hall, here we all eat and drink together and celebrate the stories of the brave who have conquered the world, or their own selves.’

So we slung down our packs by the wall on low rough hewn wooden benches and sat half on the benches and half on our own packs.

The hall was full of the murmuring of many voices, conversations in all manner of tongues. Yet somehow it seemed that all were involved in telling tales it seemed.

‘I’m thirsty,’ Uravashi said, ‘Is there some water I can get to drink?’

‘Water? In Bhagalavati hall?’ A man who had just come up to us with a tray of drinks laughed. ‘Water we don’t serve here. Chang, koumis, ale, beer, wine and mead are the drinks to be drunk here, name your beverage and I will bring it, if it is not on this tray already.’

‘Just a glass of water please,’ Said Uravashi, the man frowned and simply turned to Chopra and began again.

‘A drink for you bold sir, an ale perhaps or a toddy perchance?’

Chopra scratched his chin looking at the drinks and asked.

‘Don’t suppose a gin is a possibility?’

The man’s face lit up.

‘Gin? Why not gin? Do you impugn my honour sir? Gin you wish for, gin you shall get.’ So saying he called out in a tongue I could not understand and a woman dressed in a long flowing purple dress with a white apron rushed up with a small barrel under her arm.

‘Did I hear gin mentioned? Who wants gin?’ She looked at Chopra and smiled and wiggled her nose in a cute way. ‘Gin for the gentleman eh, please.’

So saying she poured a liquid from her barrel into a beaker and handed it to Chopra who sipped at it and said.

‘My goodness, and it comes premixed with tonic here just as I like it.’

As Chopra drank so the others all got drinks as they wished for it seemed. Chandra got a palm toddy, Champa and Gopika chose jasmine blossom wine, then it was my turn.

‘Lady what would you wish for? Your word is my command.’ The drink server said fixing me with a friendly gaze.

‘A cup of tea, Darjeeling please would be nice if you have it.’

He opened his eyes wide and bared his teeth in a strange grin.

‘Irish tea? That I can serve you. But this “Dorje-Ling” tea we will have none of here. Choose again fair maiden.’

I didn’t like his tone I decided and said.

‘Perhaps later for now I will take nothing.’

He grinned.

‘In the end you will drink with us, everybody does, we can wait.’

So saying he spun on his heels and headed off towards another party.

I listened as Chopra began to tale a fantastic tale of how he had once tracked down a serial killer in the forests of Cherapunjee who had been terrorising the tea plantation workers. It seemed a load of twaddle to me. But Champa and Gopika were as ever apparently enjoying his company and were laughing and joking with him about his bravery. I sipped on some water from my water bottle and smiled at Uravashi.

‘We seem to be the only one’s not drinking eh? Still the night is yet young.’

Uravashi frowned.

‘Madam Deepa the night may be of any age it wishes, drink is never appropriate for a woman of standing in society such as myself, or...’ She paused and said pointedly. ‘A District Magistrate.’

Actually I had to agree with her, with one proviso, a District Magistrate in a hall in a mountain valley.

Meanwhile Chopra’s tale had been interrupted. It seemed that it had reminded Chandra of an occasion when he had been carrying out an excavation on Alpha Indi IV and had been stalked by a native animal in the ruins and forced finally to shoot it at close quarters with his phaser. A close shave as he recounted it.

I was wondering about the story and what a “phaser” was when a tall rotund man dressed in a leather apron and trousers and a dark green jacket came up to us wheeling a trolley in front of him.

I blanched at what was on the platter in front of him. Okay so roast lamb had seemed irresistible last night. But this appalled me. A whole roast boar, still with the head on and a goose protruding from its jaws, and in the beak of the goose apparently the head of a mongoose. Around it for an accompaniment were what looked at first like roast potatoes, but then when I looked closely I saw they were some sort of small birds.

‘Pork and roast quail anyone?’ He looked around at us and then added.

‘The crackling is something to die for many would say, let me tempt you.’

‘Go on then, give us a plate each. Why stand on ceremony?’ Chandra said and then laughed and roared out.

‘Have I ever told you how on Zeta Virginus I ate a whole roast Elk in one sitting?’

‘I ate two when I was there!’ Bellowed Chopra and plunged his teeth into the leg of pork he held in his hand and his face became covered in grease and little droplets of gravy rolling down his chin.

Champa and Gopika were not to be outdone in this game it seemed.

‘Yakshis are not vegetarians you know, shall we tell them Gopika?’

Champa said and whispered in Gopika’s ear. Gopika collapsed in laughter on the floor spilling all her wine down the front of her dress and then stood up again.

I looked twice and blinked. Her cup was still as full as it had been before she spilled the contents.

‘I have eaten the flesh of a creature none of you men have eaten!’ She cried out and a strange intense look came into her eyes.

‘What’s that Gopika?’ Chopra asked biting into his leg of pork.

Champa giggled and said, ‘Yakshis are kind to their friends, but like the Dakinis a terrible enemy to their foes.’ She growled, ‘you are lucky you are sons of daughters of good families or the feast in the forest might have been very different.’ She and Gopika laughed and looked at Chopra and Chandra’s bodies in a strange way. I didn’t like the way the conversation was going one bit.

I glanced over at Uravashi, she was looking horrified and was trying to slink away towards the doorway. I followed her as quietly as I could. Bhakti was talking loudly with a giant as tall as herself but green and gaunt.

‘Cut each other’s heads off?’ She suddenly screamed out, ‘what kind of a damn fool challenge is that?’ I’ll cut something off your body you pillock, but it’ll not be your head.’ So saying she lunged and made a grab for an area of the male body which is valued more by many men than their heads it seems to me.

I don’t think we would have made it out of the hall if it were not for the brawl that broke out at the other end of the hall as she lunged forward.

Pandemonium broke loose. Suddenly the contented drinkers descended into a wild frenzy of blows, maddened by the drinks they had been given it seemed. As I rushed out the door I saw to my horror that Chandra was apparently fighting with Chopra and that Champa was lunging with her nails at Gopika’s face with a terrifying look in her eyes.

We ran, I and Uravashi, as fast as our feet could carry us down to the shore of the lake. Behind us I got the impression that raised voices were raising some alarm. For a dreadful moment I thought they were going to pursue us. But then I saw troops of heavily armoured figures rushing towards the hall and taking no notice of us as we tried to hide behind the rocks on the shore.

‘What shall we do now? They are all mad.’ Uravashi said and looked at me as if imploring me to save her from this nightmare.

‘They are enchanted I think, our only course is to try and get away before they notice we are gone.’ I said. I spoke to soon.

From the direction of the hall came a heart rending scream.

Torches burst into flame around it bathing it in an eerie green light. Champa peeked out from the doorway, her eye teeth glinting in the darkness of her open jaws.

‘Cooee! Deepa! Uravashi! Are you playing hide and seek?’

Gopika leaped out of the doorway and looked wildly all around.

‘We have finished Chopra now and we want something for dessert.’ she cried out. I shuddered as I saw by the torch light that her face and clothes were drenched with blood and gore

Then Chandra came out brandishing an axe in one hand and something in the other.

‘Deepa!’ He screamed, ‘Come here and marry me now! Let Gopika and Champa be the bridesmaids, Bhakti the bride’s mother and Chopra the bride’s father.’

So saying he held up what he was carrying in his other hand, it was Chopra’s severed head.

Uravashi screamed. My blood ran cold and we ran hell for leather down the beach. Chandra cried out as he ran after us.

‘Deepa! Marry me or die! Stop or I will kill you when I catch you!’

We ran if possible faster than our feet could carry us along the shore. Behind us the Yakshis screamed like banshees with Chandra waving the axe and the head in the vanguard of our dreadful pursuers.

All at once we saw up ahead what looked like a well built house with a single door standing wide open leading into a dark space. Uravashi dashed towards it and then called back to me.

‘Hide in here and barricade the door we may be safe for a while.’

I ran straight at the door and positively leapt through it, breathing a sigh of relief as I did so. A short lived sigh of relief as the door slammed closed behind me and I heard Uravashi laugh and say.

‘That is we may be safe for a while from your stubbornness!’

I looked around me all was dark for an instant and then an amber glowing sphere lit up at about head height and I screamed.

It was the paper lantern that had hung above the bed when Vera had first trapped me in her nightmare. Only now instead of me being tied to the bed it was Vera who was tied to the bed under the amber light of the lantern. Her clothes were torn and she had a wild haunted look in her eyes. She said nothing, because she was gagged. I ran forward and pulled the gag from her mouth.

‘She’s mad! She will kill us all! Help me, I can’t stand any more of this.’ Vera cried out and moaned in pain. I started to undo the ropes that bound her to the bed. Then I heard another sound. A footstep from behind the bamboo screen. I looked up and my blood froze.

I stood there smiling back at me, I was dressed in my crimson sari and with my hair neatly braided, but oddly holding a cigarette in a long cigarette holder in one hand and holding a single shot musket in the other hand.

‘Surprised to see me in this form Deepa?’

‘Maya,’ I growled. ‘what is this now?’

‘Deepa, dear darling Deepa, stupid stubborn Deepa!’ The figure snapped back at me and then said.

‘It was so delightful getting you all to come here under your own efforts, you broke down all the defensive perimeters, even scaled the wall, and disabled all of the safety protocols. How ironic, and all the time thinking you were chasing Vera’s wretched husband Chang whilst in reality you were breaking into my innermost lair.’

She glanced down at Vera and hissed at her.

‘Do not think you will escape, we have some more games to play.’

Then she looked up and laughing said.

‘There is a difference here Deepa, here things are real.’

She stubbed her cigarette out onto her palm and I felt the sharp pain of heat and burning in my own palm. I looked down and the blister was already forming.

‘Yes that’s right Deepa, here anything that happens will really injure you, not like the other illusions, this is my special place.’

Then the door started to shake and shudder and she laughed again.

‘You thought you were so clever didn’t you? “You cannot trust your senses, but you can trust your heart.” Poppycock, I have a little test of the language of love for you darling.’ She shook her head and grinned.

‘What if your own heart’s desire want’s to kill you? In a moment Chandra will break down that door and kill you with his axe unless...’

She tossed the musket in my direction and I grabbed it.

‘Unless that is you shoot him first, so darling see how the heart helps you understand the problem now, will you kill your own true love to save your life?’ Then she suddenly seemed to fade into a patch of

darkness and I heard her whisper, ‘one thing dear, death in this room is real, so choose wisely.’

As she said “wisely” the door crashed open and Chandra stood on the threshold with the axe raised over his head and a wild look on his face.

‘Deepa, you should have stopped, now I am going to have to kill you!’

I looked at him, I looked at Vera, I looked at the room.

It was a tough call, one shot, one chance, one moment to decide. Kill Chandra and live? Let Chandra kill me and sacrifice myself for his sake? Or?

I smiled at Chandra, and I took the “or” option.

I shot the amber lantern.

The air was filled with a terrible scream of “No...” that trailed off into silence as we were plunged into utter darkness. Silence suffused the blackness and I saw, heard, smelt, and felt nothing for a moment.

Then an incongruous electronic voice said.

‘Matrix Architecture Yarn Archive system failure, initiating basic machine operating system.’

‘Got you MAYA,’ I hissed in the darkness and breathed the deepest sigh of relief I ever hope to breathe.

Gradually a low white glow grew around me and revealed a very different scene from the one I had last seen. There was no room, just a broad flat area that reached off to where walls stood several hundreds yards away. I could see Uravashi, Chopra, Champa and Gopika scattered around the area, all of them were sitting up slowly and looking around themselves with a wary eye. Everything visible was clean geometrical shapes of grey First Buddha construction material. It resembled nothing so much as a vast stage set from which the props have been removed.

I myself was standing by the side of a block of grey material on which a woman, Vera, lay spread eagled and unconscious, but not tied up at all. Above the block, where the lantern had hung was a shattered crystal form, shards from it were scattered all around the area.

Chandra was standing five feet away from me with a puzzled expression on his face. He suddenly seemed to register that he was seeing me and said.

‘Deepa what is that behind you?’

I looked around, where the odd cupboard with the arcane symbols on its doors and drawers had stood was a grey and red cube which was still smoking a little from vents in its front panel.

I shrugged, 'Chandra, meet Maya.'

'Eh? Where is she?'

I shook my head and said, 'Maya was never a person Chandra, Maya was an artificial intelligence and this was it.'

I picked up a piece of the shattered crystal and looked at it and said.

'It was some sort of a projector attached to a database that was run by an artificial intelligence that extracted elements from our minds and manipulated them.'

I put the fragment into my pocket and noticed that Uravashi had got up and was coming over to me and Chandra. She was smiling as she walked and speaking into her communicator. When she got to us she said.

'I have spoken to Rom on the ship, he reports a similar transformation in everything there, and you are never going to believe this...'

I was kind of expecting what she said next.

'The ship will be arriving here in about five minutes or so. They have identified our location from my comm signal and we are only about ten miles from where the ship is docked.'

Champa and Gopika got up and walked over to us. Champa looked down at the woman on the block and said.

'Is this Vera?'

I nodded.

Chopra came up and standing by my side said.

'Shall I arrest Vera?'

Vera came round at the sound of her name being spoken. She looked around her with a haunted look in her eyes and then ran her hands down over her body as if searching for the wounds she had felt before. She grimaced and then said.

'District Magistrate Deepa, I would like to help you with your enquiries.'

I raised my eyebrows and stared at her.

'Why?'

‘I believe I may be able to help you locate my husband Donald and I need to get him to see that what we were doing was wrong and to get him to surrender himself to you and plead for clemency.’

I shook my head and said.

‘I am sorry Vera, I cannot arbitrate in issues of clemency, that is the courts affair, but I am very glad to hear you speak as you are doing, Why?’

Vera looked shamefaced and said in a low tone.

‘Deepa, being possessed by that mad intelligence made me examine what I had dedicated my life to. The intelligence was wrong, I was wrong. To abandon the ways of my forefathers was wrong. In the nightmare I found it was the element who spoke as my ancestors who spoke the truth, not the things I had been taught in school on Shaolin.’

I smiled at her and held out my hand and helped her off the block.

‘Thank you Deepa for rescuing me.’ She paused and then said, ‘in truth it seems you have rescued me from not just the web of lies the intelligence spun around my thoughts but I think also from an even worse set of lies that had been sown in my mind since my birth.’

There seemed no answer to what Vera had said. So together we all stood and stared in silence for a moment around us wondering what to do next. Then we heard the sound of Bijlirani’s altitude thrusters firing. A few moments later the ship appeared over the lip of the platform we realised we were standing on as it did so and landed a hundred yards or so from us on an open part of the area.

The entrance ramp unfolded and Rom and Natasha came out and walked towards us, all the time looking around them as if wary of what they were seeing.

‘Madam Deepa, are you aware of the location you are in?’ Rom said.

‘Not precisely Rom,’ I replied. ‘Its hard to see from here.’

Natasha broke in, ‘Come on then we can show you from the ship its extraordinary.’

I nodded, I wanted to go back to the ship for another reason as well and so we all walked solemnly back across the grey stage lit by diffuse grey lighting and back onto the ship.

As soon as I got onto the bridge I said, ‘take us up about five hundred yards Rom.’ Rom did so. Then I lined up the sights on the weapons systems and fired a series of rockets at the site where we had stood.

Three times the area was engulfed in fire and destruction.

‘Take us down again Rom.’

Chandra and the others looked at me quizzically as I trained the monitors on the area where we had stood.

I smiled, the red cube was totally destroyed, only the smouldering remains were left.

‘Rom, take a team of men and remove whatever remains of that artefact and put it in a containment field in cargo bay two.’

And then I remembered, ‘Oh yes, and put this in a separate containment field in cargo bay three.’ I handed the shard of the shattered projector to Rom and frowned. Had I done the right thing? I don’t know to this day, but I do know I wanted to be damn sure that MAYA never operated again.

Natasha was itching to show us what she had found out, Uravashi was eagerly studying the data too and a look of irritation was building on her face.

‘Of all the bare faced cheek!’ She muttered to herself. Natasha nodded in agreement. Clearly the matter was not going to go unattended for much longer, and in my view the first executive priority had been completed.

‘Okay guys, hit me with it, where the hell are we?’

‘Giant ship? Millions of miles in diameter? Whole continents and mountains and suns? Forget it folks, it never existed. This is what we are in.’

She hit the keys on her data input array and punched up onto the main view screen a picture of what was around us with a schematic overlay indicating dimensions. We were in a cylinder again. This time we were right up against one end wall of a cylinder about one mile in diameter and about twenty miles long. The cylinder was bare but for three structures it seemed. One, where we had been was situated on a high ledge at one end on the chamber wall. The climb we had made I suspected. The second was at the opposite end and its function was totally unclear as yet. But it looked a bit like the portal device we had passed through to get on the ship.

But the third, that was immediately recognisable. Slap bang in the centre of the cylinder was a collection of space ship docks around a central structure which resembled the spire of a great temple. Vajrasana.

I had seen enough I knew what we need to do next.

‘Take us back to the central space port Rom, I want some questions answered.’

I was not the only one who wanted questions answered. As we flew I was bombarded by questions. They basically all boiled down to.

‘When did you work out what was happening?’

‘Where did you discover the clues to what was happening?’

‘How did you know how to destroy MAYA?’

I spun my chair round so that I was facing everybody else. Gathered in a circle round the bridge were Rom, Natasha, Chandra, Chopra, Uravashi, Vera, Dr Sharma, Champa and Gopika.

The Yakshis were looking rather sheepish as if certain matters had come out which they would have preferred to not come to light at all. We respected their feelings and never raised that issue again. But I noticed that Chopra was not as playful with them after the debacle at Bhagalavati hall. I guess what he had gone through was not an experience he wished to be reminded of.

Chandra was also in a sombre mood. Afterwards I found out that he remembered nothing directly of the last nightmare pursuit on the beach. Nor yet of what he had said to me or done after he began drinking in the hall. But even so he was left with a profound sense of disquiet it seems.

Chopra in a sense recovered easiest. His sense of humour helped I think as the first thing he said as we started the de-briefing was.

‘They say you should never lose your head in a crisis, I think I now understand that better than most people.’ He smiled at Chandra.

‘No hard feeling Chandra, none of us were in control of what we did.’

Then he turned and looked at me.

‘What I don’t get is when did you work out what was happening?’

‘It was the nightmare visions, they simply didn’t make sense. At first I simply had a sense that there was something wrong and then I began to see a pattern to the inconsistencies, and that did make sense.’

Chandra frowned and said, ‘What inconsistencies?’

‘First, why was Maya always trying to get us to go somewhere in every illusion than the first one I had? Why did she try and get you to go somewhere? Why did she try and get us to go somewhere? I realised that whatever else was the case for some reason we could not

trust anything, either in the illusions or in the apparent reality, but that the motivation, to get us to go somewhere was a constant feature.'

'That was it?' Chopra said, 'I don't understand how that made you realise where to look for clues to what was happening.'

I nodded my head and tapped on my forehead.

'I realised it was all in here, all the elements in the scenes we were going through were being assembled from our minds but then manipulated in some way. When I saw the great temple at Vajrasana and realised it was the same as the temple at Bodh Gaya I knew what was going on. I told Champa it seemed like the archetype on which Bodh Gaya was based, but I realised it was really an abstraction based on what we knew from the Bodh Gaya on earth. In fact I then realised the clothes shop was the key. Why was there a clothes shop in Vajrasana called "The Renowned Tailors"? Surely the makers of the original Vajrasana would not have included a clothes shop run by people with Muslim names in a structure built long before Islam first appeared? It made no sense, it wasn't the archetype on which Bodh Gaya was based it was an extrapolation from our shared experiences masquerading as an archetypal Bodh Gaya.'

Chandra grinned, 'That's right if you think of it lots of things made no sense, why was there a great bridge crossing the river where the old Japanese bridge crossed the river? There was no reason for it to exist, there was nothing worth going to on the other shore.'

I smiled, 'And where was all that traffic going? We never saw any of it when we apparently crossed the bridge. You are right Chandra it was another extrapolation. I knew it was wrong to as it was not an archetype for an ancient construction, but for something which was only built according to historical records in the twentieth century.'

Natasha nodded, 'I begin to see now what you are talking about, but I still don't see how you knew how to destroy MAYA.'

'That was a long shot I admit, and up to the last moment I was not sure. But my uncle became a police commissioner and he told me that one thing I should never forget was that however baffling a crime seemed there was always one thing that gave a serial criminal away. There was always something that was consistent in all the crimes. Be it the mode of execution, the manner of getaway, the motivation for the crime, it doesn't matter, its the common element that is the key.'

All I had to do was find the common element, and then I could work out what was happening.'

Chopra said in a bewildered tone, 'So what was the common element? I can't see one.'

I shook my head, 'Chopra, you have hit the nail on the head again, but without realising you have done so.'

'I have?' Said Chopra looked very confused.

'Seeing, that was the common element, there was always something strange about the light in the visions. First the amber lantern in my nightmare, then the strange moonlight and lanterns in Chandra's nightmare, then the cold light in the nightmare I had on the journey and finally the green glow at the hall at Bhagalavati. Always there was something about light, something about vision, after all everything we were seeing was a form of vision.'

Vera spoke, 'Pardon me for asking, but how did you know to shoot the lantern in that dreadful chamber?'

'Again it was an issue of a common element. Twice I had been in that strange chamber, once in a vision to begin with, then again at the end and each time the only major light source in it was the amber lantern.'

I turned and looked at Champa.

'The key was what you told Chopra on this bridge. Do you know what I am talking about?'

Champa shrugged and looked around her as if hoping for a clue.

'No.'

'Chopra was fooling around with a relay device and you thumped it and it went into a mode where it was in the form of a glowing ball and you said that "most entities find a golden globe fairly comprehensible", in other words anything like a golden globe might be a manifestation of some sort of a machine, in a basic mode as designed by the First Buddhas. The amber lantern was such a globe, and it had been in three visions, the first vision, Chandra's vision and the final vision. It was too much of a coincidence.'

'But I saw you scream with horror when you saw it!' Vera said.

I shook my head and said.

'No Vera, I screamed not from fear, but with elation, Maya had revealed herself to me. She was the source of the light, the projector

of illusions. So instead of shooting at the illusions, I shot the projector of the illusions.'

I paused and then added, 'after all you cannot shoot illusions what would be the point in that? No I knew in that instant I had found the source of the illusions'

Chopra said, 'So that clears up everything, how neat.'

'Not exactly,' I said.

A worried look crossed Chandra's brow.

'There are still matters that you can't resolve.'

I stood up walked over to the drinks dispenser and poured myself a cup of coffee. Then stood there savouring the taste for a moment and said.

'Yes unfortunately a number of issues remain outstanding.'

'What are they?' Uravashi asked with a cold look on her face as if she had seen a ghost she had hoped had been laid to rest.

I put my coffee down on the work surface and leaned against the wall.

'My first concern is for General Chang. Where is he? My second concern is for accomplices of MAYA, other such rogue systems which may be operating. I suspect that there were more than one forces aligned against us, it is too easy to believe that in one stroke we have solved all of the problems. My third concern is with the other ships, where are they? Inspector Bhairava told us they had gone to the next level, where is that? Why are they not here? I do not believe Inspector Bhairava's answer at all, it was too neat. I get the sense he was hiding something from me. Then there is Inspector Bhairava himself and all his talk of the Great Goddess, that strikes me as odd to say the least.'

I sat down again.

'My god,' said Chopra, 'you seem to have thought of everything Deepa.'

I shook my head, 'No Chopra there are many questions that remain unanswered yet.'

Chandra broke in and said, 'I agree with Deepa, and in fact there is one issue that is still totally unanswered, the issue that brought me here in the first place. We still don't have the faintest clue about the basic question. Where are the First Buddhas?'

Champa spoke up speaking solemnly, ‘What upsets me most is that we seem to have had the ground cut from under our feet. All my life I have believed in the reality of Madhyadesha, it was my home, the great forest. Yet now I find that it was a metal cylinder a bare twenty miles long. How is this possible.’

Vera sadly said, ‘perhaps like myself you have been freed from one illusion only to realise that you were trapped in another illusion to begin with.’

Rom broke in.

‘Now beginning descent to the space port complex designated “Vajrasana”.’

‘Good,’ I said, ‘perhaps we will find answers here to at least some of our questions.’

‘Are there any life signs present on scans Uravashi?’

‘Only one Deepa, a human life sign in the plaza by the temple.’

We didn’t bother to land at Pacchetti port, but landed directly in the plaza by the main temple. It seemed that the scans were wrong to begin with as we could see as we landed a group of figures sitting in a circle on boxes and bags who were apparently having a meal.

‘Odd,’ I said as we got off the ship and walked towards the group.

‘They look for all the world as if they are having a picnic.’

That was in fact what was happening, the boxes were hampers of food, the figures were sitting around a check pattern blanket and on the blanket was a teapot and cups and saucers laid out for a meal for about a dozen people.

‘My goodness,’ Chopra said, ‘its Inspector Bhairava and Officer Savitri and somebody I don’t recognise.’

‘But I do,’ I added, ‘That is General Chang.’

We approached warily and saw that they were all eating sandwiches and drinking tea. Inspector Bhairava looked up as we got near and said.

‘Ah Deepa, Chandra, and friends so nice of you to drop in for tea, its Darjeeling Deepa, your favourite, you must join us.’

‘Everybody stop where you are,’ I ordered and we all froze.

‘We are not about to sit down and simply have tea with you Inspector Bhairava unless you start by answering some questions about what is going on here.’

‘By all means Deepa, I would be happy to, but please sit down all of you and join us.’

I looked suspiciously at the food and drink.

‘Don’t worry Deepa its not enchanted or anything, actually is all from twentieth century Earth, really wonderful stuff, you will love it.’

‘Inspector Bhairava!’ I squealed, ‘Twentieth century Earth? Are you just trying to complicate matters further?’

He looked bemused for a moment and then said, ‘No, I just like food from this period, I’ll explain how I got it if you will only stop faffing around and sit down.’ Then he smiled at me and said, ‘please?’

I motioned to my crew and we all sat down.

‘That is so much more civilised Deepa, milk and two sugars is it?’

I nodded and then said, ‘actually I want answers with my tea not sugar.’

‘To start with I wish to know the answers to three questions. First, who are you? Second, who is she?’ I pointed at his companion, ‘And third, what is he doing here?’ I said emphatically waving my hand in the direction of General Chang.’ Then I added, ‘issues about tea, and biscuits which would be nice if you have some, can wait.’

‘Certainly Deepa,’ Inspector Bhairava answered as he handed me a cup of tea and two biscuits. ‘I will answer your three wishes in reverse order if you don’t mind. This is Mr Chang, he was possessed by the rogue artificial intelligence system that was intended to close down matrix scenarios, the “Yarn Abolition Matrix Archive” system, or Yama as it called itself. Just as Vera was by the system intended to initiate matrix scenarios the “Matrix Architecture Yarn Archive”, or Maya as it came to call itself. Both Maya and Yama were intended to function as a kind of, how can I put this, as a kind of “in-flight entertainment” for the journey. They were planned to help while away the long journey by providing amusing scenarios for the passengers to enjoy. Unfortunately the systems malfunctioned after the First Buddhas left and plunged the matrix into chaos. To be honest I think they had both gone quite mad, don’t you think so Parvati?’

The woman who had called her self “Officer Savitri” previously nodded and added.

‘Not quite insane, dear, totally insane. Why they even refused to recognise my command codes and tried to attack me their programmer.’

She glanced over in my direction and smiled at me and said.

‘Thank you very much dear, a brilliant stroke to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.’

I looked at her with bewilderment.

‘I see,’ she smiled, ‘you don’t know quite what you did do you?’

I shook my head.

‘When you shot the central processor you destroyed not just Maya as you thought but also Yama which was also a sub-routine in the Matrix Archive. What Maya created Yama eliminated. It had to be like that or the ship would have simply been full of phantasms with no space left at all for any new threads, or yarns, in the fabric of the program. It was Maya’s task to instantiate instances of new yarn objects and Yama’s to destroy them and free up memory for use again in later derived classes of events. It was all very neat, but there was a bug in the program I designed and I never noticed it until too late.’

‘A bug?’ asked Chandra with a hint of comprehension growing on his face.

‘Yes, they relied on a pure data flow to instigate event handling, if the data got corrupted, so did the sub-routines. So when the First Buddha’s disappeared the sub-routines went into a regressive loop trying to create events to no purpose and ended up thinking they were actually the programmers, very unfortunate, I must remember to set up some sort of control conditions in the next version to abort such event sequences.’

‘The next version?’ I said coldly and shuddered.

Next moment Parvati smiled and said, ‘Yes thank you for bringing the samples of the defective code back, see I have already added them back to the object library.’ She pointed at the necklace on her neck and I saw on it amongst many other objects: the shard of crystal from the globe and the remnants of the red cube, the latter now somehow shrunk to a tiny size. Almost like an icon representing something below the surface of the necklace indicated by a graphic representation of it.

Inspector Bhairava broke in, ‘now dear don’t start boring our guests and discussing programming with them all day.’

He turned to me, ‘so that answers your first two questions. Mr Chang is here because he was released from Yama’s control and we retrieved him from a data bank where he was being held, and this is my partner,

the chief in-flight programmer. That leaves one question I think unanswered.

‘Yes, I suppose it does, although I don’t like the answer to the second question much.’

‘Tsk, tsk, Deepa, don’t be so picky. Anyhow if you didn’t like that answer you are certainly not going to like the answer to your first question. You want to know who I am?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sorry Deepa, that is need to know only information, I cannot tell you. What is more I regret to say that delightful as this conversation has been we must be going now, so delightful to have had tea with you.’

‘What?’ I cried, ‘you cannot go now I have many other questions to ask.’

‘Sorry Deepa three wishes is a traditional maximum in these sorts of situations, and you have used up your three wishes.’

The images of both of them began to glitter and scintillate with lights and in a moment faded from our sight.

‘Damn,’ said Chandra, ‘I wanted to ask them if they were really gods, and now they are gone.’

We all looked at each other dumb struck. Then where Bhairava had been a pattern of glittering light re-appeared and a voice spoke as if from the air.

‘Oh yes. One other thing. You did very well to close down Maya and Yama and we would like to offer you an opportunity to fix another problem. When you leave the portal you will find yourself in the twenty-second century shortly before the destruction of Old Earth. See if you can manage to stop it happening. Oh, and do enjoy the Darjeeling tea in the twenty-second century Deepa, it was at its best then.’

The words subsided into silence and the scintillating light faded into darkness, and we were left in an empty court yard in an alien space ship. We searched the ship. It was empty of all life forms and held no clues that we could find to what had happened. So we left that strange and eerie seeming place and accelerated through the portal. This time there were no strange journeys through our psyches to be made. Just a brief glimpse of a flash of light and... we were back at the portal at

Fomalhaut. We set course for Earth and made the transition into hyperspace.

On the Starship Bijlirani: 09/10/2645 23:34

Later that night during the flight I was laying in bed beside Deepa when I rolled over and stared at her resting there next to me and said.

‘Deepa, I don’t understand many things at the moment, but one thing bothers me at the moment more than anything else.’

She touched my chin with one hand and turned it towards her face and put her other arm around my shoulder and gently lay looking at me and said.

‘What is that Chandra?’

‘Deepa did you chose between your heart and your head? Did you chose not to shoot me in order to protect me? Were you willing to sacrifice yourself to save me?’

‘Chandra, Chandra, the truth is other than the lies that Maya spun around us in her web of deception. Don’t you see that yet?’

I frowned, this was not the answer I had been expecting.

‘No, what are you trying to say?’

‘There were never only the choices that Maya claimed, that was her lie. The alternatives she offered us were no alternatives at all. There was always another alternative, but she tried to keep that from us by keeping us alternately bemused by her illusions or building up our egos by making us think we were penetrating her mysterious plots.’

‘So what was the third way?’

She pulled me close and whispered in my ear, her breath a palpable sensation on my skin.

‘Neither reality nor illusion but experiencing things just as they are in themselves. That is the middle way Chandra.’

‘Neither heart or mind?’ I sensed the beginning of an understanding.

Deepa laughed quietly, ‘You can’t really say that Chandra “heart or mind”, it makes no sense, the heart and the mind are one and the same thing, there is no choice to be made. Except...’

She paused and kissed my cheek delicately.

‘I choose to choose between neither heart nor mind or heart and mind.’

I tugged playfully on a lock of her hair spread out on the pillow and asked.

‘So now we come to it. What choice did you make?’

She didn’t answer me in words, but the passion in her embrace told me all I needed to know.

Chapter 6 Right Effort

Bodh Gaya - Gautam's Restaurant: 12/10/2191 08:46

I watched as a breeze stirred the leaves in the great Banyan tree above me and followed the path of one leaf as it fell from a high branch down into the courtyard. The topmost branches of the tree almost touched the roof of the atrium in which it was growing. The leaf finally came to rest on a book lying in the open top of my bag leaning up against the wooden table leg. I reached down and picked up the leaf and the book it had landed on.

'Perfect', I said, looking at the heart shaped leaf, 'Just what I needed, a bookmark.' So saying I opened the book and found page 432 and putting it down on the table rested the leaf in the open book. Page 432 of my Personal Planet guide book to India for 2190 was headed, "Bodh Gaya: Bihar - population five million - Principal attractions: Mahabodhi Temple, World Peace Council Stupa, New Singhalese Great Monastery Project, Maitreya Statue Memorial." I turned to the places to stay section.

'Damn,' Chopra said poking at the tiny buttons on his electronic version of the guide book, 'how do you get this thing to work?'

I chuckled and replied, 'Should have got the classic printed book version like me. See what it says on the back cover?'

I pointed at a small inset panel on the back of my guidebook. It said on it "Many travellers still prefer this printed version of the guide book as some users report it works under a wider range of conditions than the electronic version which can be adversely affected by material shock, humidity and other environmental conditions."

Chopra grunted and said, 'Ruddy 22nd century technology, couldn't even make a working electronic book even at the height of Old Earth culture.'

I glared and hissed at him. 'Shush, don't talk that way Chopra, this is the 22nd century and we don't want to be acting out of context here. Any how what concerns me is this. Now that we have got here where are we going to stay?'

In truth the problem was how to choose a place to stay. The guidebook said that there were over a hundred hotels and lodges in Bodh Gaya in addition to the fifty or so Buddhist monasteries which offered accommodation. I had been reading the guide book on the train which had arrived here at Pacchati Central station a few minutes ago. As the super fast bullet train from Kanpur had slowed on approach to Bodh Gaya I had looked at the landscape around me and tried to understand how it related to the landscape I had known so well in my own time in the twenty-seventh century. The hills to the East were still there beyond the river, but now the whole area was a vast urban conurbation that seemed to stretch in all directions. Freeway flyovers and high rise blocks and skyscrapers seemed to march off in every direction from the windows of the train. Here an area of low rise buildings and what the guide book described euphemistically as “heritage” buildings surrounded the station plaza. We had piled out of the station and been faced by the decision of where to go. It was Chopra who had solved the problem for the moment by suggesting we stop for a tea and consult our guide books. I had not liked the look of “Shukdeo’s Burger Bar” and so we had come in here to “Gautam’s Restaurant”, which had the odd slogan “Have you Tested?” inscribed in flashing neon lettering above its doorway.

‘Looking for a room for the night?’ The waiter said as he brought us over our teas and a plate of fried fritters, pakoras, for Chopra.

I looked up, he was a neatly dressed young man in a dark suit with a glint in his eye and a lilt in his voice. He looked over my shoulder at the guide book and grinned as he saw Chopra still vainly trying to get his electronic version to work.

‘Yes we are, do you have any recommendations?’

‘Why not try the New Myanmar Monastery, neat and clean, reasonable rates, and...’ He grinned, ‘the best thing is that it is just across from the station, look over there.’

He pointed out the plate glass window of the restaurant to the other side of the taxi rank beyond the highway. There, nestled behind some trees, was a collection of ramshackle buildings and a temple which might have once looked splendid, but now had a somewhat run down air to it.

Chopra threw up his hands in the air in despair, his guide book screen was now displaying data on “Boot Guide, trekking the modern way”. He closed the screen with a sharp motion, that probably did it no good, and looking at me said.

‘Well, that would have at least one advantage, we wouldn’t have to get a taxi to get there.’

I nodded and sipped on my tea. It was not an inspiring brew.

‘Okay we will check it out before we go anywhere else.’

‘You won’t regret it,’ The young man said and added, ‘My great grandfather used to say that it was like a home away from home, even though it was far from his native hills in Assam.’ I thought to myself, ‘how a descendent of somebody from Assam can know so little about how to make tea I just don’t understand.’

A few minutes later we left Gautam’s and crossed the highway on a pedestrian flyover and ducked down between the Ashoka trees and found ourselves standing in the gateway of the building the young man had pointed out.

We looked at the rooms that we were shown, they were nothing special, in an old three storey building at the back of the compound on a roof area. Once the block might have been higher than the buildings around it. Now it was dwarfed by a skyscraper that rose up behind it, bronze and dull green plate glass windows covered its sheer walls. By craning our heads out the back window of the room we could just make out a sign on its topmost floors saying “Mahabodhi Society Regional Centre.” Still, the room was clean, the beds reasonable and the bathroom water heater appeared to work. I and Chandra took one room, Chopra and Uravashi another. We took the end room, which was bigger, but as I opened the end windows I saw that even that view was blocked by another tower block. Still I thought, its somewhere to stay.

‘Okay we will take the room.’ I told the guy showing us round. He smiled.

‘When you are ready just come down to the office and you can fill in your details then. Make your self at home.’

He was just on his way out when he turned and said.

‘By the way where are you folks from? I can’t quite place your accents. Are you Belters?’ I smiled sweetly, and replied.

‘Yes that’s right we are from a mining colony in the outer belt, our orbit is just outside that of Callisto. Ever been to the belt?’

The man shook his head, ‘No, never left Earth, maybe one day.’

‘You drop by and visit if your ever down our way.’ I said.

He grinned and left the room closing the door behind him.

I breathed a sigh of relief, another attempt to pass as a Belter had gone all right. On our journey in Hyperspace we had spent hours trying to work out how we could travel around in the 22nd century without arousing suspicion about our origins. Hiding our entry to the solar system was easy, the Bijlirani was fitted with a standard Police issue cloaking device. So we had been able to enter orbit without problem. But how to travel on the surface once we transported down was another question. Eventually it was Uravashi who solved the problem, she had remembered that her ancestors had worked on a mining colony in the asteroid belt before they joined the diaspora and that the dialects spoken on Hindustan still showed traces of the old “Belter” culture Hindi dialects. So we had decided to try and pass ourselves off as tourists from the Belt. So far it had worked okay.

We had one issue I knew we had to deal with. At our pre mission briefing while we were in orbit above Earth I had laid out my suspicions to the crew.

‘I think we must be careful of one thing above all others while we are in this time frame. My suspicion is that we might not be the only visitors to this time frame. Our true identity must not be discovered by people from this time frame or by other visitors from the future.’

Chandra nodded and said.

‘Who else do you suspect of being here? More rogue programs like Maya?’

I shook my head.

‘No I don’t suspect that. The problem is I still don’t understand why Bhairava did not tell us about what happened to the other ships which entered the portal. He spoke of them going to the next “the next level”. At the time I thought he meant of the ship. As did you Champa.’ I looked at Champa who spoke up.

‘Yes it seems that we Yakshis were sorely misled by what we seem to remember. I and my sisters have been talking and we are not yet sure of what happened. At the moment we think that maybe although Madhyadesha was not in that place, it still exists somewhere,

somehow. We have resolved to search for it now as we travel with you. What of these other ships? Do you think they are here? Why do they pose a threat to us? Surely monks would not threaten anybody?’

‘I disagree, their motives are unclear, Geshe-La of the Tibetan ship kept information back from me, and then said that they all wanted to gain possession of First Buddha technology. That is my worry. Each of the other ships wants like us, if it is here, to get hold of a Buddha Vehicle. What is more I am sure that if there was one or more Buddha Vehicle in Bodh Gaya in our time, it must have been here in this time also. If the other ships from the future are here we cannot trust them to co-operate with us or each other for that matter.’

‘So what is the problem?’ Chopra said, ‘why don’t we just ignore them?’

I smiled and said.

‘But that won’t work Chopra, they are looking for the same things as us. If we find the Buddha Vehicle first but they are spying on us they will simply try and steal it out from under our noses. What do we do then?’

Chopra fell silent, Chandra looked lost in contemplation, Uravashi spoke.

‘Deepa, let’s hide from them, conceal our presence. After all we have to hide from the 22nd people our true identity, do the same with them.’

‘I agree Uravashi, but to do that we need to avoid the use of technology which could show traces on scans from our time as being from technology of our time. In particular they may be watching for transports to the surface in Bodh Gaya.’

Uravashi grinned, ‘certainly that would be easy to detect with sensors even from a cloaked ship like ours, even if we can’t detect other cloaked ships.’

‘That is the problem,’ I said decisively, ‘I don’t believe we are the only cloaked ship in orbit at this time, I am sure the Tibetan, Chinese and Singhalese ships are here as well and all scanning the Bodh Gaya area looking for each other’s transport signals.’

I stared at the main view screen and said in challenge, ‘I know you are out there searching like us, but I swear we will find the Buddha Vehicle before you!’

The screen did not answer me back.

So we had transported down to the Kanpur industrial city zone. We thought that nobody would be scanning the area. After all a continuous urban zone of over three hundred million people stretching from where Delhi had once stood to the region around Allahabad would not be easy to monitor. Eventually we decided to transport in to the park lands in the Indian Institute of Technology. The spacious park lands offered a rare opportunity to find open space in late 22nd century India. What is more I remembered the songs my mother had sung to me of how it was at IIT that the technologies for the Diaspora Colony ships were developed which gave humanity a chance to find its destiny amongst the stars. Without IIT there would have been no humanity in the 27th century. I would never have been born. If for me this trip was a pilgrimage, this was the true pilgrimage. To see where Rajendra Gopalacharya and his team had worked developing ancient yoga techniques of stabilising the vital breath into the technology of bio-stasis containment fields. The same containment fields in which my ancestors had been able to survive the two and a half centuries of journey in a sub-light colony ship crawling its way through the immensity of deep space to New Hindustan.

As it was our sojourn in IIT was short, and not so sweet. We were chucked out by security guards for not having ID cards valid for the IIT campus. To be honest it was a fluke our data archives had records of the form of ID cards for this period, which we had replicated for this away mission. But, they didn't have records of IIT identity cards, we had not even realised we would need them. Its easy to be wise in hindsight.

As they closed the gates behind us I heard one say to the other, 'Weird people Belter tourists, how they hell they get in anyway?' The other was starting to say 'Hey!' as we melted into the teeming throng on the street and headed toward the station.

The monastery manager looked over my shoulder as I wrote my name in the registration book.

'Hema Malini? What a nice name, and your partners name is Amitabh Bacchan eh?' He laughed, 'How come you Belters all name yourselves after old Hindi movie stars?'

'Its not true,' I giggled, 'better ask my friends Lata Matangeshkar and Mohammad Rafi about that in room 304.'

'Big difference, singers, stars what's with the Film-E obsession?'

I knew the answer this, Uravashi had told me the origin of this Belter custom. I repeated her answer.

‘There isn’t much to do in the Asteroid belt except work and kill time. What better way than Film-E?’

Film-E had been the big development that probably stopped the early solar system colonists going stark staring mad. Nobody had realised the problem with space was quite simply it was boring. It went on infinitely in all directions and nothing happened in it in human terms. Early fossickers exploring the belt had gone half mad it seemed until they realised that only by developing a healthy fantasy life could they stay half sane in reality.

Luckily this came at the same time as the Film-E was developed. A direct induction of electronic data from a Matrix Archive into all the six human sensory channels, with feedback, so you could experience being your favourite star in a movie, not just watch them. Uravashi said that her family traditions claimed that the only way to live in the belt was to imagine you were a Film-E star. The truth was nobody could really stand being stuck on a cramped ship with two or three people, who you probably hated, for years on end in a mining probe trawling the Belt for valuable minerals.

‘Hema!’ Chopra said rushing in through the door to the office, half tripping over a dog attempting to snooze on the door step.

‘What is it Mohammad?’ I asked.

‘Can you finish up here, Amitabh has seen some... friends... of his.’

I quickly scrawled my remaining data onto the registration book and flashing the manager a smile whisked out the door with Chopra. The dog looked up at me and gave a happy yelp, as if sizing me up and deciding: I would be a person generous with biscuits, unlike Chopra whose main attribute was his big flat feet.

‘Who were they?’ I asked once we were in the open on the sidewalk outside.

‘Let Chandra tell you himself, here he is.’ Chopra pointed to a parked taxi with Chandra sitting in the back. He swung the door open and gestured to me to get in. As I did Chopra got in to the seat by the driver and the taxi sped off down the highway.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked Chandra.

He didn’t say anything for a moment then he said.

‘Deepa, your attempt at hiding from us, was, how can I say, very poor.’

I stared in horror as he touched a button on his belt and the impression of Chandra sitting next to me disappeared. Instead, I saw Geshe-La smiling broadly at me and with a great grin on his face.

‘Chopra!’ I cried out and turned to him for a help, only to be met by a friendly smile from a Tibetan who said, ‘Deepa, don’t you remember me? My name is Dorje.’

I certainly remembered him, the man who kept the shoes at the Tibetan Monastery. I looked at him again, he had clearly been keeping his eye on more than just shoes in his old job. I turned back to Geshe-La.

‘I still want to know the answer to my question. Where are we going?’

‘To meet the others of course. We were all trying to hide from one another but it is very foolish. Let us be open. We cannot hide from each other. We tracked your life signs from the moment you transported down. Don’t you remember it is an Abbott’s business to know where everybody is all the time? Do you think I do it just by looking?’

He laughed, ‘I suppose I could try but having a sophisticated sensor array linked to a data matrix is much simpler. Your life sign signature has been on record with me since first we met. You will have to try much harder to deceive me Deepa.’

I frowned and slumped my shoulders. ‘You are infuriating Geshe-La, why do you keep so much back?’

He nodded his head and replied, ‘It is called “skill in means” Deepa, telling only what needs to be known at any one time.’

The taxi slowed down to leave the highway at the Hanuman Temple Interchange exit ramp and then accelerated onto the elevated inner orbital freeway. We sped past block after block of skyscrapers and monastery complexes. I had read about these structures in history books but the sight of them was something else again.

By the mid 21st century land in Bodh Gaya had become ridiculously expensive as all the available land had become covered with buildings. So like ancient Manhattan the only choice was to build up. It was the Buddhist World Peace council that constructed the first of the high rise monasteries for its headquarters. It was described as a

“stupa” in the guide book. Whether any ancient Indians would have recognised it as one is another question. Instead of a low cylindrical drum with a dome riding on it topped with an arrangement of umbrellas it was something else again. The dome was still there, but it was perched atop a forty storey skyscraper, the umbrellas were still there, but they doubled as radio antenna and were identical to satellite dishes.

‘So, Geshe-La, this is getting irritating, where are we going precisely?’

In response Geshe-La pointed out the window to the World Peace Council Stupa we were rapidly approaching, ‘Almost there Deepa.’

The taxi swung into a cavernous entrance and rather than heading for the lobby it turned off and cruised down a ramp into an underground multi storey car parking lot. Dorje, and the driver who they called Pema, motioned to me to get out. Geshe-La smiled, I had little choice. We crossed the bare concrete floor of the parking level and stood for a moment in front of the stainless steel doors of a lift. Moments after Dorje pressed the button the doors slid open. I walked in to the lift, flanked by Geshe-La and Dorje, and with the third security guard dogging my heels.

I kept silent as I felt us rising up the building and noticed that the floor level indicator was showing us rapidly up the levels. We stopped on what the indicator said was the 41st floor, one level below the top floor. The doors slid open and I saw a brightly lit empty marble stone lined corridor. We marched down it for a few moments and then turned into one of the countless similar doors which lined its sides.

The room was lit only by a dim flickering candle on a round table which cast a pale pool of light onto its centre. There did not seem to be any windows, or they had heavy drapes or blinds over them. Pema indicated I should sit down at the nearest chair. I did so and then as my eyes got used to the gloom I looked around me. Geshe-La had sat down opposite to me. I glanced to my left. I was surprised to see the elegant figure of Dhammarakkhita sitting there with a wistful smile playing around his features. I looked to my right and took a double take in disbelief. The person sitting there shouldn’t have been there at all. Donald Chang.

Geshe-La said slowly, ‘Let’s put our cards on the table so to speak. We all want to find the Buddha Vehicle, we all know that. What is

more we cannot hide from each other as with my sensors I can detect the presence of everybody who was in Bodh Gaya in the 27th century. So I suggest to you that the skillfull means to employ is to pool our resources.'

'Dearest Deepa,' Dhammarakkhita spoke, 'I am so sorry that we meet again under these circumstances. However, I would like to endorse my Tibetan colleague's words. Please this is not the time for squabbling. Let us put aside enmity and rivalry and work together for the Dhamma.'

I looked carefully at him and chose to not reply other than smiling back at him.

'Madam Magistrate,' Chang spoke, 'I regret the need for duplicity as my colleagues do. You recall that before we parted company at the temple the last time I saw you I said to you that I hoped that under different circumstances we could be allies. I urge you to realise that this is the time for the alliance. Together we can locate the Buddha Vehicle.'

I squinted a bit due to the bright light and grinned at him for a moment before turning back to Geshe-La.

'So you still have not found it eh? Why not? Why don't you ask General Chang to lead you to the entrance ways he used last time?'

Geshe-La wriggled a bit in his chair and said nothing. General Chang spoke.

'Deepa, we needed control of the temple to do the alterations to its structure which would reveal the presence of the lift shaft. In this time frame we can hardly do the same, without attracting the wrong sort of attention from the authorities.'

Geshe-La broke in.

'That's why we need to find another way into the caverns. Do you know where we should be looking?'

I frowned and decided to raise the stakes, 'Chandra is the most likely to know where to look but he hasn't told me anything yet. Perhaps you should kidnap him as well.'

Dhammarakkhita laughed, 'Deepa dear, we have not kidnapped you, nor yet have no any intention of kidnapping any of your crew. This is merely an extraordinary meeting called under emergency circumstances, so to speak, at the level of department heads.'

Okay, I thought, so they want to play it this way.

‘So you expect us to co-operate then? Are am I to be kept hostage to ensure my crew’s co-operation?’

Geshe-La shook his head emphatically and replied. ‘Certainly not Deepa, you are free to go whenever you wish, we have no intention of holding you here. That’s right isn’t it General Chang?’

General Chang frowned, ‘against my instincts, I have to agree with you, Geshe-La the time has not come for the holding of a hostage, yet.’ He said the last word in an icy tone as if warning me that his faction was indeed capable of such actions.

‘How will we communicate? Do you intend I come here every time I want to see you?’

Dhammarakkhita chuckled, ‘Deepa, you will not need to do anything, we will keep an eye on you, don’t worry about that. All you need to do is to realise two things. First, you are being observed at all times, second that it really makes sense to pool our resources.’

We had come to the final hand, ‘Why?’

General Chang said quietly, ‘noticed the date?’

I shrugged, ‘yes its Thursday the 13th of October 2191, I noticed when I put my details in the registration book this morning.’

Dhammarakkhita tapped the table lightly, ‘Anything strike you about that?’

I sighed, of course. Geshe-La nodded.

‘Yes Deepa, time is short, data from our records puts the date the final war broke out as...’

‘Sunday the 23rd of October 2191, we have...’

‘Ten days.’ General Chang completed my sentence for me.

‘Deepa we have ten days to find the Buddha Vehicle and escape from here, or we will all be marooned in space, and time, far from our home systems. Good luck.’

As Geshe-La said good luck, the candle blew out, everything dark.

I said, ‘Hello? Can somebody turn the lights on please?’

There was no answer.

‘Geshe-La? Is there a power cut going on?’

Again no answer.

I got up and felt my way back towards the door I had come in by. I groped in the dark and found the door handle. I opened the door and as the light from the corridor flooded into the room saw that the room was empty save for the table, a still smouldering candle, and four

chairs and another door on the other side of the table. I turned on the light switch by the door. I saw then we were not in a suite but in some sort of service room. The walls were lined with lockers. It was perhaps a staff changing room. I strode round the table and opened the other door and looked out. It opened onto an identical corridor to that I had entered by. It was quite empty and had lifts at each end of it. Clearly it was not going to be possible to pursue Geshe-La and his compatriots. They had slipped away.

‘Very neat,’ I said smiling to myself.

I went out and turned left and headed down the corridor and took the lift to the lobby level. In the lobby everything looked normal. It was bustling with life and I could see a sign above the check in desk saying. ‘Welcome to Bodh Gaya Rotary Club Delegates to the Annual Lions Dinner: Venue - Buddhist World Peace Council headquarters.’

I sat down on a couch by a window and looked out at a line of palms and bouganvillias that lined the strip of garden outside.

I smiled as I noticed a dog which was stretching itself after apparently having had a snooze in the sun. The dog turned and stared at me through the window and seemed to wink at me. I giggled to myself and thought, ‘Winking dogs? What next?’ After a moment I went over to a line of courtesy phone booths and dialled the Myanmar Monastery.

‘Hello is that the manager? Mr Burkha? How are you? This is Hema Malini speaking, could you tell my partner Mr Amitabh to come and meet me in the lobby of the World Peace Council Stupa? Thank you.’

I sat down again and sat apparently lost in thought waiting for Chandra to come and pick me up.

Whether I was being watched didn’t bother me. Unless the observers could read my thoughts, in which case things had come to a pretty pass anyway.

‘Well?’ I thought in my mind, ‘What did you make of all that?’

Champa giggled at me from inside my mind.

Before we had beamed down Champa had merged herself with me, Gopika with Chandra, Radhika with Chopra, Preeti with Uravashi. We figured that Yakshis would have been out of place in the twenty-second century. But, we wanted the insights and talents they could provide. Champa giggled again.

‘I could hardly stop myself laughing when they introduced “General Chang” to us! They obviously cannot read minds, or they would have known he is on our ship.’

‘What is more they can’t scan through our cloaking field it seems.’

‘What of this sensor array he spoke of, can he really track you by your life sign signature? Does that technology exist?’

‘I don’t know, but I don’t think he has it anyway, he probably had agents watching the station exits, much simpler. Champa, could you see who was impersonating General Chang?’

‘Silly, of course I could, their form shifting fields are like flimsy gauze to me, Yakshis see into the heart of life. It was Dorje, he’s a man of many talents it seems.’

‘Okay Champa, and what of Dhammarakkhita?’

‘He was the person he appeared to be.’

‘What happened to Pema?’

‘He stood behind you while you talked then left the room with the others.’

It was a very odd feeling having another person merged with you. It was as if they were a voice whispering in your mind. I had to remind myself that I was not hallucinating and that Champa was actually somehow in union with me.

‘Deepa, are you okay?’ Chandra was standing in front of me, by his side was Chopra and Uravashi.

‘They are who they seem,’ Champa’s voice echoed in my thoughts.

I smiled and grabbed Chandra’s hand and pulled him down so that he was sitting next to me and embraced him. As I did so I held my lips to his ear and whispered. ‘The Tibetans have made their opening gambit, they are working with the Singhalese with them as well.’

In reply Chandra said out loud, ‘Okay that is no problem then.’ Whilst he gave my wrist a little squeeze to show that he was relieved to feel my presence again.

We took the seventh taxi from the rank, much to the irritation of the first six cabs. I felt we needed to be showing great caution to our shadows, who would certainly be watching us I thought.

I expected us to go back to the Myanmar Monastery. Instead Chandra told the taxi driver to take us to the Maitreya Statue Memorial. The taxi accelerated into the fast lane on the freeway and sped out past the old centre to the Domanii area. As we approached

the Project site I stared in fascination at the scene unfolding around me. The area was blighted by short sited and ramshackle developments that had sprung up in an uncontrolled mess around the Project site. We drove past hotel blocks with smashed windows and youths hanging around in the streets. Graffiti covered the buildings, the tags of different gangs. I thought I could make out “Bodh Gaya Tigers”, “Ranvir Sena Boys” and “Maoist Central Crew-MCC”. I shivered. Even in our time we still remembered the horror of the gangs and their wars on Old Earth. It had been a nexus of irresponsible pouring of funds into Bihar for charitable development work, the old caste armies transforming into Mafia gangs and hard drugs had been the catalyst. The area around the Maitreya Memorial became the one of the most notorious slums of 22nd century India.

Our Taxi didn't slow down as it left the freeway. That would have been much too dangerous. Instead we headed down the security tunnel into the Project site at what must have been seventy miles an hour or more. The taxi security codes were no doubt checked as we finally came to a halt in a bare concrete chamber and got out. We were greeted by heavily armed men in flak jackets who frisked us. All the while we were observed by others from behind bullet proof glass screens who kept their weapons trained on.

‘God these people are paranoid,’ I said to Chandra.

He shrugged, ‘Better safe than sorry.’

We left the concrete bunker and emerged into the gardens surrounding the statue site. Acres of trees set amidst lush gardens and pleasant streams. The trees were full of buzzing insects feasting on the blossom nectar and I could feel Champa thrilling to the scent of it all inside me. She spoke.

‘Gopika says that Chandra has chosen this site as nobody will think it strange if we stand in silence for a while here, and that will give us an opportunity to really talk amongst ourselves via we Yakshis communicating with each other. I'll open up channels as soon as we came to the crater.’

I don't know to be honest what was stranger, hearing not just one but a chorus of voices in my mind, or standing at that sad monument. The incident of 86 was a tragedy that should have never happened. Everybody involved in the project early on made a decision that simply turned out to be wrong. In hind sight building a five hundred

foot tall statue next to an airport did seem as strange as it really was. Perhaps they never expected the airport to really re-open. They certainly never expected the boom years in the mid century in India. Constant streams of flights, first just the one runway, then another, then another. There were five terminals by 2186, and flights taking off every few minutes night and day seven days a week.

It was the full moon at the end of the rainy season that day. They holiest day of the year in many people's eyes and an ideal time to make merit by giving offerings. The statue was crowded with people.

Azerbaijan Airlines were using old jumbo jets as freighters to carry high explosives for use in mining. The enquiry concluded that the pilot did not properly understand English. He simply descended too low too early on his approach to the airport. What it can have been like for those in the revolving restaurant in the head of the Buddha that night is hard to imagine. One moment you are sitting sipping your drinks in the most amazing statue project in the world. The eighth wonder of the world, built to last a thousand years. Next moment a jumbo jet is looming out of the night sky towards you.

Casualty figures were not available, the Project Directors tried to suppress them as far as possible. But whatever, the consensus was that after the incident there was no possibility of rebuilding. Rather the remains of the statue were left as a memorial to those who died that night.

We stood on the surrounding walkway that ringed the crater zone. It was bare, in stark contrast to the opulent gardens. It was full of twisted metal and concrete debris. There were pools of bronze and copper where the intense heat of the conflagration had melted the panels that made up the body of the sculpture. All that was left were the feet, the feet of the Buddha in a forest of wrecked dreams and burnt aspirations. Who would not stare upon such works of men and be reduced to silence.

The whispering amongst the Yakshis was almost as disconcerting as the scene before us. I broke in on their discussion about how much we knew about what the Tibetan and Singhalese factions knew about the First Buddha Vehicles, and us.

'Champa, we may not know much about what they know, but we learned a lot about what they don't know from that meeting.'

'What?' Came Champa's thought.

‘They don’t know how to find the Buddha Vehicle. They don’t know where the Chinese are. They don’t know Chang is with us. They don’t know about you and your sisters. And most of all, they are worried they are running out of time.’

‘Deepa, Chandra agrees with you, but he says that the false General Chang’s logic was correct, there is no chance in this time frame of excavating in the temple compound.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘He says the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee had, or has, a library, he thinks we should go there and search for any literature that might refer to anything else that might be an access route to the caverns.’

Out loud I said, ‘Chandra, this place is getting to me, lets go to the Temple.’

Inside I thought, ‘Champa tell Gopika to say to Chandra, lets go to the library.’

Bodh Gaya - MBTMC library: 12/10/2191 14:19

The Management Committee library was housed in the original twentieth century building. It was in the central courtyard of a semicircular skyscraper block that faced onto the plaza around the temple. Somehow funding for fifty floors of offices had been found, but not for a new library building. Typical I thought.

All four of us spent the afternoon reading. It was getting hot outside and the antique fans simply stirred the sultry air in the reading room. I read a book with the enticing title of “Glimpses of Gaya and Bodh Gaya”. I was struck by a section on “famous mythical personalities who have visited Bodh Gaya”, but found nothing but light relief in it. Chopra was reading General Alexander Cunningham’s 19th century accounts of the reconstruction of the temple by the British authorities in the 1880s. He was fascinated by the photographs of “before” and “after”. The before photographs were little more than a pile of bricks, like we had found in the twenty-seventh century. The after of an impressive brick and stucco edifice. I was struck by the lack of gold and silver plating, so our period’s reconstruction had not been so accurate perhaps after all. Uravashi was fascinated by an account of the temple’s history by an Australian monk and pointed out to me that the story of the antagonism between the Singhalese monks and the

Mahayana community seemed to have roots that went back to the tenth century. How come I wondered they were collaborating now?

Chandra had declared that he had read all of these books long ago. But he enthusiastically picked up a copy of a 19th century translation of the Chinese pilgrims accounts of Bodh Gaya in the fifth century CE. By around four o'clock we were all itching to go and have some tea or something to break the mood of depression that drifted over us in that sombre and dark library reading room.

I finally solved the impasse by buying a printed copy of the Chinese pilgrims accounts, "The Records of the Western Lands" at the book shop I found next to the library. We dragged Chandra away from the library and I thrust the book into his hand.

'Come on "Amitabh",' I was afraid of using his real name in public, 'lets go and have a tea before we visit the temple. We have come all this way to visit Bodh Gaya, we might as well visit the temple.'

'Okay "Hema",' he grinned, 'tea it is then. But where?'

Turned out the obvious place was the MacSevak family restaurant around the corner. We got our teas and snacks on plastic trays at the counter and carried them back to one of the antiseptically clean Formica tables that were ranged along the windows upstairs. Sitting there we got a good view of the temple complex. Like that of our own time, or in the alternate version at Vajrasana: yet different again.

This version of the compound was full of trees, which had not re grown in our own time, and prayer flags, which had been missing from the alternate version. The other difference was that this version was a bit ramshackle when you looked closely at it. Everything in twenty-second century India was. Even the tea. The hot water was not really hot enough, the "non-dairy whitener" was what it said it was, and the tea bag wrapping might claim it was "MacDarjeeling", but I doubted it's contents had ever had anything to do with the Himalayas.

Chandra was oblivious to the view, lost in the volume he was studying. As it must have been several hundred pages long this meant he might be stuck for a long time. Eventually I had to drag him away by force. The restaurant staff had already cleaned our table several times and obviously felt we were unreasonably occupying the table space long after finishing our family meal. Although in my case my tea remained virtually untouched.

We stopped at a stall on the plaza and bought a box of candles in the form of lotus flowers in white, red and an odd yellow shade, of colours. Forcing our way through ranks of postcard sellers, another feature of the temple I was unfamiliar with we left our shoe at a shoe stand and then entered the temple compound.

What struck me most was the hustle and bustle. All around there people involved in all manner of devotions. Groups were walking around on all three levels of walkways around the compound. Individuals, many red robed Tibetan monks, were sitting, standing or bowing by the various smaller monuments in the courtyard around the temple. Some were sitting quietly and probably repeating mantras. Some were performing prostrations over and over again. Some were endlessly pouring rice grains over upturned bowls while muttering something. Others were turning prayer wheels they held in their hands as they walked again and again around the temple compound. The spaces between the trees and lamp stands were strung with countless flags in primary colours. All with printed designs on them of Tibetan script and Tara and other deities. Prayer flags in other words.

Some things were missing that I had seen in the alternate Vajrasana version. The tall subsidiary temples clustered around the main shrine were not there. Just their bases. Nor yet was the great temple of the Kassapa Buddha there. Just a dirty tin shed in which people lit butter lamps. Nor yet was there the marvellous slab of primal Buddha nature under the Bodhi tree just an odd gold plated tinplate structure.

But one thing was the same. The Bodhi tree itself. It seemed that whatever version of Bodh Gaya I visited this one feature remained constant. The great tree itself. We all sat by it and breathed in the air of sanctity that emanated from it. Monks and lay people were chanting. To the South of the tree Chinese pilgrims were chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha while ringing glass bells to a harmonic melody. To the North Theravada monks from Ceylon were intoning mellifluous Pali chants.

Sitting there I fancied I could almost have been in any of the Bodh Gayas I had visited. In the darkness of its foliage and the shadows its trunk and boughs cast I could almost glimpse the oneness from which it manifested. We all sat in silent meditation as the sun set under the spreading canopy of the Bodhi tree. I felt a sense of peace for the first time since I had arrived in this Bodh Gaya.

It was short lived. Suddenly the air was rent by loudspeakers which relayed the sound of a group of monks in the temple trying to chant, but somehow not getting it right. We left the compound and picking up our shoes scurried out into the plaza. Uravashi spotted yet another version of the Shiva Hotel.

‘Let’s try this version of the Shiva Hotel. I hear they made good pakoras once. It might be okay again in this time. What do you think?’

Chandra nodded and we all headed in and sat down. It turned out he would have settled for any hotel as all he wanted was a place to read. For the rest of us we sat quietly eating our meal and wondering which of the other guests were actually agents of the other ships from the future. It rather spoiled the party to be honest.

Bodh Gaya - Myanmar Monastery: 12/10/2191 22:20

I sat on the bed in the room and tried to ignore a noisy party of Koreans who had turned out to be staying in the same row of rooms as us. For some reason they were chopping cabbage for Kimchi, a kind of sauerkraut, on the roof outside our rooms. It was possible to ignore the noise I concluded, but not the pickle smell.

Chandra finally put down the book and smiled and came over to me and drew me off the bed and into the room at the back where there was a shower.

I was pleasantly surprised by his next action. He took his clothes off and as he urged me on I did the same. Together we climbed into the shower cubicle and stood under the shower which he turned on full volume. We stood in the spray of water naked with the water trickling down us as he tried to lather soap and rub it onto my body. He leant close to me and whispered.

‘Deepa, I think we can talk in here, I don’t think they can bug the shower while we are actually in it.’

I chuckled and pulled him close to me, ‘Chandra, we can make a bit of noise anyway and that might distract them as well.’ I didn’t need to say much more. Even if the bathroom was bugged with a camera they would not have thought what we doing was talking about plans for finding the Buddha Vehicle.

‘Deepa, I think I have worked out a way to enter the caverns. I have been reading the pilgrims accounts and it seems to me we are looking in the wrong place altogether.’

‘Where should we be looking?’

‘In caves.’

‘Caves?’

‘Yes we should look for similar structures to the access tunnels we first located on Tau Ceti III. From them we can gain access to the underground cavern systems that must lie under this place.’

We sank down and sat on the floor of the shower. I positioned myself on Chandra’s lap with my legs on either side of his buttocks. We sat face to face so our bodies were touching, our lips were brushing each other’s, and we could whisper in each other’s ears.

‘Weren’t there caves in the hills to the East? At Dugeswari? But they didn’t lead to any shafts as far as I remember.’

Chandra shrugged, which sent a tremor through my body, and replied.

‘Yes, the main cave at Pragbodhi was very small according to reports, but one report in that book by the Australian monk speaks of other caves nearby. They are the ones we need to search for.’

I sighed and said, ‘But that’s for tomorrow.’

Later we were lying in bed together when I realised that I had forgotten about one thing. I thought, ‘Oh Champa, I am so sorry, that was very insensitive of us.’

Champa giggled and didn’t say anything. But I felt that somehow she was sharing in the smile on my face as I fell asleep.

Bodh Gaya - Dugeswari Hill: 13/10/2191 06:30

We concluded that there was no way we could hide our interests in the Dugeswari hills from our observers. So instead we decided that we would go to the hills anyway. But if we found the caves the Yakshis would investigate them while we came back as a blind. Apparently returning empty handed. In the twenty-seventh century they had lain beyond the habit dome and I had never visited them. In the Vajrasana Bodh Gaya we had sped past them on the highway without stopping at them. Once they might have been out in the countryside. In this time they turned out to be in a run down neighbourhood. As we approached the taxi rank for the Pragbodhi

caves the taxi driver told us that it was not a good area, we ought to take care.

It was altogether a strange area. Affluent luxury villas in compounds with high walls and security guards and gates. Random mud huts and settlements of people grazing cattle amidst the roads which serviced the villas.

If we were followed it was not obvious. There were no other pilgrims at the Pragbodhi cave temple. It commemorated the place where the Buddha had spent six years practising austerities before renouncing the path of harsh austerity in favour of the middle way. We climbed up the steps that led over the rough scree slope at the base of the jagged range of hills and found ourselves at the site of the Buddha's austerities. It was a ramshackle monastery. The resident monks were from a Tibetan community who had refused to return to Tibet after the rapprochement between the fifteenth Dalai Lama and the authorities in the New Southern Empire's capital in Shanghai.

We climbed the final steps and ducked down low to enter the cave. It was a disappointment. Tiny and evidently little more than a rock shelter in reality. There was no way it led to an access shaft to the caverns.

Even so we lit candles and incense and a Hindu priest who was officiating in the worshipping of an image of the goddess in the cave marked our foreheads with red vermilion powder Tilak marks.

Outside we sat drinking black tea and biscuits that the monks offered us. The tea wasn't half bad either.

'Do we go to the left or the right, that is North or South?' Chopra asked.

'Left.' Chandra said decisively, then added, 'I have found it pays off in First Buddha issues.' A dog was sitting in the courtyard with us and almost as Chandra spoke he walked up to me as bold as brass and rubbed against my leg.

I smiled at him and offered him a biscuit. He smiled back at me.

So we set off down the hill a bit and then set off around the hill on a rough track through the scree slope, boulders and scrubby bushes. After about twenty minutes we realised two things. First we could see the next cave up ahead. Second we were being followed. Every so often we could hear twigs cracking behind us.

Chopra motioned to me to take the lead while he and Chandra brought up the rear. As we arrived at the weathered brick platform at the cave entrance our pursuers decided to make their presence overt. There were four of us, and at least a dozen of them. They were all young, all male, and all had caps with "MCC" written on them and carried baseball bats in their hands.

We stood on the platform by the cave and looked at them as they spread out in a semicircle around us.

'Welcome to the Dungeshwari hills,' one of the bigger figures in the centre said, 'we are your welcoming party.' Another laughed and tapped his bat on his hand and said, 'there is the matter of the entry fee to be settled, what about the little cutie to start? What do you reckon Kaluwa?' He pointed his bat at Uravashi.

I was getting worried when Champa's thought in my mind electrified me.

'The back wall of this cave is false, Chandra is looking at it and we can see through it there is a tunnel leading back from it into the hill.'

'Chandra, Chopra,' I barked out, 'Figure out how to open up the way behind us and let us "cuties" give the welcoming crew an answer to their demand.'

The gang were closing in, they stopped when I turned to face their leader and said in a loud voice.

'Its not nice to speak to a girl in the way your companion did, Mr Kaluwa.'

I grimaced and added, 'didn't your mama ever teach you manners?'

The leader laughed, 'Lady, I shot my own mama when she messed with me, nobody never taught me nothing. But we are going to teach you bunch a lesson you will never forget, in the rest of your, very short, lives.'

I frowned, his tone and manner was hard to stall. Still worse he waved on his gang and they advanced closer.

I drew my revolver and pointed it at him. 'Stop right there sonny.'

He looked startled for a moment and then laughed, 'A pop gun? You threaten me with a pop gun?'

He doubled up laughing and for a moment I thought the situation was diffused. Then he straightened up and called out, 'Rajuwa, Bipuwa, Gheruwa, Pappuwa, come forward.' As he said this four

more figures stepped out from the bushes, each carrying an antique but impressive looking sub machine gun aimed at us.

From behind me I had also been hearing the sound of rocks moving and bricks crashing and thudding. Then like the nectar of moon light on an autumn night I heard.

‘Deepa we have cleared a way for us to squeeze into the tunnel behind, see if you can stall them for a moment longer.’

I was lost for what to do when suddenly I saw behind Kaluwa’s gang other figures, it seems the pursuers were themselves pursued.

Kaluwa heard the sound and spun around. Another gang came out from the bushes. Their caps had “RSB” on them, they were Ranvir Sena Boys.

‘Hey there Kaluwa, what are you doing working our patch? Eh?’ Their leader shouted out and spat on the ground, ‘Respect for the RSB! Don’t you see?’

Kaluwa growled and spat, ‘Babbaluwa! Who says this is your patch? It doesn’t come down the line like that to me. This is the patch of the MCC! Don’t you see?’

They faced off to each other. I risked a glimpse behind me and saw Uravashi wiggling her way through the opening in the back of the cave. I backed towards it keeping a wary eye on events on the slope in front. In the end it was Kaluwa’s assistant who saved the day for me. He tried to make a move for a weapon concealed in his pocket. He never made it, the RSB gunners opened up, as did the MCC crew. I took my chance and scrambled through the narrow entrance to the tunnel as bullets strafed the spot where I had been standing moments earlier.

Clearly our plan for going back as a decoy if we found the caves was a dead duck. I also cursed myself for not checking the guide book better, or for the editors for not updating it recently enough on the dangers of the area.

As I stood up and Uravashi grabbed my hand and urged me on I heard a voice behind me from beyond the narrow entrance to the tunnel.

‘We’ll be waiting cuties, don’t keep us waiting too long, the boys want your company pretty ladies.’

Clearly there was no going back.

It was dark in the tunnel but Champa added her vision to mine and I saw through her eyes that we were in a tunnel that rapidly opened out as we stumbled along it and after a few moments it became a circular tunnel with smooth walls. We broke into a run and pounded down the tunnel after Chandra and Chopra who were surging ahead. The tunnel started to curve and as we came round the bend I saw that it was a dead end. We were trapped in a circular domed cavern in the hillside.

Chandra was smiling as we entered the tunnel he slapped the wall to the left of the entrance and a circular housing rose up in the middle of the floor. He motioned to us to stay still and turned and went back up the tunnel in the direction of where we had come from. I followed and saw him stop where the smooth features of the tunnel broke down as it intersected with the rougher rocks of the natural strata.

‘Stay back Deepa,’ he said, and raising his hand aimed it at the roof of the tunnel. As he did so a scintillating beam of light leapt from his fingers to the rocks which began to fuse and melt and moments later the tunnel collapsed where we had come through it and the way in was blocked by hundreds of tones of rock and debris.

‘Chandra!’ I said in a perplexed tone, ‘How did you do that?’

He shrugged, ‘Don’t ask me. Ask Gopika. She was the one who did that.’

In my mind Champa spoke, ‘we didn’t want those thugs pursuing us did we?’

I had to agree

But I felt unhappy about being trapped in the hill, ‘Chandra, we are trapped.’

‘No we are not Deepa,’ Chandra said leading me back to the circular chamber.

He led me to the threshold of the central housing and then beckoned to Uravashi and Chopra to join us and we stepped into the housing.

‘Welcome to a standard First Buddha lift like that I travelled in on Tau Ceti III.’

He motioned towards the panel by the left side of the door near me and said.

‘Would you like to do the honours?’

I grinned and pressed the button. The doors slid closed. The lighting came on. The lift started to descend.

Chopra chuckled, ‘Well I can’t see us being followed in that way.’

I thought to myself, ‘But what if the others have found other ways in?’

Bodh Gaya - Dugeswari Hill: 13/10/2191 10:05

The lift seemed to fall down the shaft at a precipitate rate.

‘God, do all the lifts go at this speed?’ Chopra said.

‘Seems that way to me.’ I replied.

‘Not so Chandra,’ Deepa cut in, ‘The lift on the Vehicle was quicker.’

I remembered the nightmare vision on that trip and shuddered.

‘Let’s hope it does not lead to somewhere like that this time.’

We didn’t have long to wait until we found out. Moments later the lift seemed to fall from the shaft and emerge into a vast space. It was another cylinder like that I had descended into on Tau Ceti III. I breathed a sigh of relief, not an access to some sort of hellish realm but to another set of ship yards. I stared around eagerly.

‘What are those structures?’ Chopra said pointing out to one side where we could see a long array of towers and gantries.

‘Shipyards,’ I said then puzzled added, ‘But the arrangement is different. These are not clustered around plazas. They seem to be arranged in a long line.’

I stared, it was similar to the shipyards under Tau Ceti III, but different. Here the plan was apparently that a single line of ships was laid out along the floor of the cavern, almost like a conveyer belt. I reckoned I could see at least twenty-four ships. The lift was falling fast though and as we approached the ground level, Uravashi cried out.

‘There are people down here!’

‘What? Who are they?’

The sight of the people flashed before my eyes for a moment and then they were hidden by the housing the lift sank into on the floor of the chamber.

An electronic ‘ping’ sound resonated through the lift and the doors slid open. We were on a broad plaza. But it was far from empty and figures were rushing towards the lift from all directions. Nor yet was there in this lift any symbol indicating a lower level. So we could not escape from them by descending further in this shaft. Nor yet could we go back up, to be simply trapped in the chamber in the hill again.

‘Perhaps they are first Buddhas...’ Chopra sighed as we stared out at the rapidly approaching figures.

‘They are not Buddhas.’ Deepa cried, ‘they are...’

She didn’t get a chance to finish as suddenly two ropes were dropped from above the doorway and a pair of figures dressed in dark clothing and with fabric wrapped around their faces slid down the ropes and dropped onto the floor.

‘Drop your weapons and put your hands up!’ One of them shouted.

They were not aliens, they were very clearly humans.

I did as they asked. There was no choice they held weapons trained on us.

‘Come with us!’ The man on the right shouted and motioning at us with his weapon ushered us out of the lift. We emerged onto the square as a group of about a dozen men formed up around us. They were all dressed in grey nondescript uniforms. But as I looked at their weapons I realised who they were. Chinese issue rifles from the 22nd century. Deepa had seen as well.

‘So you are from the Chinese ship?’ She said.

‘Shut up! No talking!’ The leader screamed at her and waved the butt of his rifle in the direction of her head.

We were hurried across the plaza. I had time to notice that the First Buddha technology was not fully operational, the shops and offices were all bare grey structures. ‘Ah,’ I thought, ‘They don’t know how to activate First Buddha technology.’

In my mind Champa whispered, ‘Not don’t know, can’t, they don’t have the right mind set to be able to operate First Buddha materials.’

I nodded. One of the guards spun round and seemed to be looking at me intently. He, or she, evidently concluded there was no immediate threat but he said something to a companion and the speed of our walk across the square turned into a rapid trot.

We passed a tree enclosure, it held a fine specimen of an aged fig tree. Evidently the life support system was fully functioning on automatic here. Even the irrigation systems were still functioning. Another difference from Tau Ceti III.

We rounded the corner of the access lane to the square and saw in front of us a ground craft. For a moment I couldn’t place it, it wasn’t 27th century, it wasn’t First Buddha, but it looked familiar. Then it came to me it was a Beijing Peoples Republic armoured troop carrier

of the 22nd century. I didn't have time to appreciate any further niceties as we were made to run up the back ramp and into the craft.

'Down on the floor! Hands on the backs of your heads! Now!' The group leader shouted. We complied, it was hard not to as the craft jerked into motion and sped off we could hardly have kept on our feet anyway.

I didn't like the sense of not knowing what was happening as we lay face down on the cold hard floor of the vehicle.

Champa whispered in my mind, 'I am monitoring what is going on.'

'Okay,' I thought, 'What's happening?'

'Nothing much, take it easy Chandra.'

The personnel carrier lurched over a bump in the surface.

'Ouch,' I thought to Champa, 'Any idea where we are going?'

'No, but for now lets play along and see what they want.'

All at once the craft came to a halt and I heard.

'On your feet! Quick move!'

It wasn't easy getting to my feet as quickly as our captors wanted and I was grabbed roughly by my hair as I was half way up and yanked up and propelled in some direction. I felt my feet going down the access ramp and hit the surface of some sort of area.

'Quick straight ahead! No stopping!' The voice urged us on and I moved ahead. Moments later I saw we had come from an open area into a caged off security area and were approaching an open door.

'Ouch!' I cried out.

I was grabbed from behind and roughly pushed through the doorway. The others being also pushed through after me. Then the door to the chamber slammed closed. Then there was silence.

'Okay Champa, where are we?' I thought.

'Chandra you are in some kind of a compound they have erected in the central plaza, it looks like they anticipated visitors and made arrangements. We are in a holding cell basically.'

'Are we on our own?'

'Yes, there are just the four of you, and us four of course, but they don't know that.'

'What should we do?'

'Chandra, Deepa says we are all to sit it out for a while and don't talk. She thinks that this was a kind of automatic response to an intrusion and in a while we will be sent for by higher authorities. She

is not happy that the Chinese seem to have collaborated with their 22nd century compatriots.’

I wasn't happy either. None of us knew anything about time travel. If that was what we were really doing. But it seemed obvious that making our presence known was not likely to have a beneficial effect on the future. In fact most people theorised that interference in past events would have disastrous effects. Such as altering events in such a way as you yourself had never been born and creating all manner of paradoxes. It seemed that this bunch was not worried by this at all.

‘Somebody is coming,’ Champa whispered in my mind.

The sound of the chamber door being opened could be heard and then I was yanked to my feet and frog marched out of the chamber, as were I guess my companions. We were marched down a corridor and pushed through another door into a half lit room where I was shoved down into a chair near the door.

I was sitting at one end of a long table. I glanced from side to side. Deepa was on my right, Chopra and Uravashi on my left.

I looked down the table.

At the opposite end of it two figures sat in semi darkness. One was a shaven headed monk the other a woman in uniform.

‘So these are the crew of the Hindustan Police Force ship Bijlirani?’ The woman asked the monk. He nodded and sat silently and without moving.

‘Very good Venerable Abbott, we thank you for your co-operation.’

She stood up and walked around the table in the shadows to behind us where we could not see her and then said.

‘The Venerable Abbott has seen the error of his counter-proletariat ways and is being most co-operative. I hope you do the same for your own good. Which is your commanding officer?’

Deepa spoke up, ‘I am, District Magistrate Deepa Bharati, commanding officer of the Hindustan Police Force Ship ALPYV III.’

‘And you are?’ I felt a cold circle of metal, a gun barrel I guessed, on my back.

‘Dr Chandra Gupta Research Officer of the Jefferson Institute on New Panama.’

‘You?’

‘Inspector Uravashi Mishra of the Hindustan Police Force Ship ALPYV III.’

‘You?’

‘Inspector Yash Chopra of the Hindustan Police Force Ship ALPYV III.’

There was a moments silence and then I heard her sigh.

‘Useless,’ the woman said slowly, ‘you are all useless to me unless you can help me get these ships in space. Which of you can do that?’

Deepa spoke, ‘None of us can, none of us have ever even been inside one of these First Buddha ships.’

The woman growled, ‘Where is your ship?’

‘In orbit.’ Deepa replied.

The woman walked round the table again and resumed her seat at the far end and crossed her hands in front of her on the table and stared at Deepa.

‘District Magistrate Bharati, you and your crew are a problem for me.’

She shook her head.

‘My orders from the Central Council are clear, to seize the so called “First Buddha” technology ships. Left to my own devices I would require you to surrender your own ship to the Peoples Liberation Army. However, our attempts to encourage the Abbott to hand over his own ship were in vain.’ She turned to the Abbott.

‘Such a pity that none of your men survived questioning, is it not?’

Her head swung round and her eyes stared at us.

‘My choice would be to see which of you would give me access to your ship, with the right encouragement.’

She slapped her fist down on the table, ‘Consider yourselves lucky then that the fools on the Central Council have declared that this is not to be your fate. Our sole aim is to be possession of the First Buddha ships. Your usefulness to the people’s revolution lies only in this.’ She paused and looking at the Abbott asked. ‘General Donald Chang is the name isn’t it of the leader of the group that gained access to the Buddha Vehicle?’

The Abbott nodded.

‘So then Deepa, your job, and that of your crew is to persuade General Chang, to join us. According to our agents he is staying at the Siddhartha hotel. After you are ejected from here you will locate him and persuade him to return.’

Deepa said quietly, ‘And if we don’t?’

The woman chuckled, ‘Do not fail Madam Magistrate, the future of your nation depends on it. If you do not bring Chang and his crew here we will not hesitate to destroy that which serves the people no purpose. You have ten days to complete your mission. On the tenth day our patience will be exhausted. Return then or we will destroy India in a nuclear holocaust. If we cannot have the Buddha Vehicle, nobody can.’

She smiled, ‘Don’t fail or you will pay the price. Do not think that because you are on the surface you will be safe from our missiles. You will not. Nor yet will your ship, we will blanket bomb the entire orbital region and destroy any ships hiding there too. There is no escape. The choice is simple, succeed or die.’

I was grabbed from behind. To my horror my hands were pulled behind my back and my wrists tied and I was gagged and blindfolded. Then I was roughly pulled from my seat and out the door. As the door closed behind us I heard a low voice quickly say.

‘Follow the Dharma friends...’

Then there was a thud, like the sound of a blunt object hitting a shaven head. The door slammed closed. We were rushed down a corridor and hurled into a chamber. Doors slid closed behind us and we felt the floor move. We were in a First Buddha lift going up a lift shaft. But to where?

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The lift came to a halt with an atypical thud, as if it had run into something. Even through my blindfold I could sense the lights had gone out. For a dreadful moment I thought the lift had failed to make it to the top of the shaft. Then I heard the doors slide open and then there was silence for a moment. The silence was broken by a tremulous voice.

‘Hello? Hello? Is there anybody in there?’

I tried to sit up and looked into the dark. After some moments I sensed that there were robed figures looking in at us from the darkness beyond the door.

‘Mmmm,’ I tried to say something, but I couldn’t speak through the gag.

One of the figures suddenly seemed to have an idea and rushed back to where I could make out some bags hanging on a wall. It grabbed a

bag and pulled something from it and pointed it in my direction. I flinched expecting a bullet. Instead I was suddenly dazzled by the bright glare from a flashlight.

‘My goodness!’ One figure cried and then the figures rushed forward and shone the light on us.

‘What happened to you?’ One asked, Chopra tried to speak and shook his head. One of the figures said to the other.

‘They are gagged! Take that man’s gag off for heavens sake Sangharakkhita.’

His companion reached down and slowly pulled the gag off me, which was much more painful than if he had ripped off I reckoned. Still I could speak.

‘Quick get us out of here and release me and my companions please.’

Sangharakkhita motioned to another man and said, ‘Mahanama untie the other man and then ...they can untie their companions...’

We quickly untied Deepa and Uravashi and a few moments later we were all sitting on a bench and massaging our wrists and trying to assess how many bruises and scrapes we had on our bodies. Surprisingly it didn’t feel to bad.

‘With a little help from your friends,’ Champa whispered, ‘we are adjusting your cellular structure to recover as rapidly as possible. You will all be as right as rain in a few moments.’

One monk was looking in perplexity at the lift structure. ‘Is this a new shower cubicle? Who ordered it put here? Why has it broken the new light fixtures?’

‘Keep out of there!’ I shouted at him, ‘Its no shower room its a lift that leads to the caverns under this place.’

The monk sighed, ‘Ah so it is true then, there are caverns under Bodh Gaya, I have heard of the underground tunnels that link the different lakes and temples. Everybody keep away from that thing whatever it is. Mahanama, go and inform the Abbottess there is something strange going on here and we are bringing some visitors to meet her.’

Uravashi listened to his speech and as he spoke a puzzled expression grew on her face as soon as he finished speaking she said.

‘Did you say “Abbottess”?’

The monk looked at her with an equally puzzled expression for a moment and then his eyes lit up.

‘Yes Abbottess, don’t you know about our Abbottess?’

Uravashi shook her head, ‘I was under the impression that the Singhalese monastic community did not have Abbottesses.’

He smiled, ‘No, no dear lady we move with the times in Ceylon, since the ordination lineages for women were re-established in the late 20th century the nuns community has made great strides and our Abbottess exemplifies modern Theravada at its best. She is the first woman to head a unified monastic community of monks and nuns in the Great Bodh Gaya Singhalese Monastery. Surely you must have heard of the Venerable Sthaviraputri?’

We all raised our eyebrows in astonishment.

He looked at us in perplexity for an instant and then said.

‘Where are you people from?’

Deepa coughed, ‘We are from the Asteroid belt news travels slowly in our parts, perhaps that is why we have not heard. I look forward to meeting your Abbottess with great eagerness.’

His head nodded as he said, ‘I am sure the meeting will be one which is mutually enlightening. But before we go any further there is one thing I must ask.

He sat down next to me and looked me straight in the eye.

‘You look like you have stories to tell which will take a while to tell.’ He paused. ‘But, first I need to know one thing, were you tied up because you were escaping from the authorities or from criminals?’

‘Criminals.’ I said.

He smiled, ‘Thank you for speaking to the point. I believe you, you speak plainly and I believe your body, mind and speech are as one. My name is the Venerable Assaji, what is yours?’

I had to decide what to say, I went with my gut feeling.

‘My name is Dr Chandra Gupta.’

Deepa broke in, ‘I am pleased to meet you Venerable Assaji, my name is Miss Deepa Bharati,’ she gestured at Uravashi and Chopra said, ‘This is Ms Uravashi Mishra and this is Mr Yash Chopra. Would it be possible for us to have some water to drink. We are exhausted after our ordeal.’

‘Of course. How thoughtless of me not to offer before. Come this way.’

He led us out of the changing rooms and into a corridor which was lined with lockers. Then up some stairs towards a lift. Suddenly Deepa asked.

‘Are we in the basements of the Singhalese Great Monastery?’

‘Certainly,’ Assaji replied, ‘We are in the lowest basement level, seven levels below the surface.’

Deepa smiled and said, ‘I always knew there was something about the monastery basement plans. I should have checked them more carefully.’

‘Pardon me Miss, checked the plans? Are you in the planning department?’

Deepa was lost for a words for a moment it seemed and then she said.

‘No, I am a student of archaeology and I was referring to the plans of the medieval monastery which I once saw.’

Assaji smiled, ‘Our Abbottess shares your interest in archaeology, she has sought to reconstruct the monastery as far as possible as it was at its height in the twelfth century of the Christian era. Although...’ He paused as we reached the lift and he pressed the call button. ‘With all the amenities the 22nd century can offer.’

As we entered the lift he added.

‘You are lucky the grand re-opening is in a few days you might care to attend. It is exactly a thousand years since the monastery fell in the Turkish invasions and the Abbottess has decided to inaugurate the new monastery on the exact anniversary date of the original sack of the monastery. So after a thousand years the monastery will rise from the ashes again on Sunday the 23rd of October 2191.’

Where had I heard that date recently? I puzzled for a moment and then I remembered I hadn’t heard it recently. But I had read it in a history journal. It was the day recent researches suggested the final nuclear war broke out on Old Earth.

The lift came to a halt and we stepped out. For an instant I felt kind of shaky as I was gripped by a sense of vertigo. We were standing in a clear glass walled corridor with a transparent ceiling and floor that was poised high above the ground. It led from the lift shaft which I saw was sculpted into the form of a spire like tower, over a vast courtyard to a central tower which dominated the view in front of me.

We must have been standing at least a hundred and fifty feet above ground level.

‘Come on friends don’t dawdle, the Abbotess wants to offer you refreshments when you meet her and she says she is eager to meet you.’ Assaji said and for the first time I realised that he was wearing a small mobile comm link on his right ear.

So saying Assaji strode on ahead and we followed along over the seemingly perilous path over the narrow bridge over the abyss of space below. ‘Strange,’ I thought to myself, ‘I have hung in the depths of space light years from the nearest planet and felt no fear but put me a hundred and fifty feet above the earth on a walkway and I get vertigo.’

I breathed in deeply and grinned at Deepa who smiled serenely at me and took my hand and together we walked towards the central tower of the monastery complex.

‘Chandra.’ Champa’s voice whispered in my thoughts, ‘we are detecting some very odd signatures from the tower ahead, it is not a building.’

‘Don’t tell me, its a space ship?’

‘Humm, not sure of that yet, but its certainly not a 22nd century building. We are detecting elements of First Buddha technology in its make up. Chandra take care, this is something strange. Even a Yakshi’s eyes cannot penetrate the structure. There is no telling what is inside it. We have alerted Deepa and the others as well.’

So there was more to this than met the eye. Still what met the eye was striking. Towering several hundred feet in the air was a sleek angled wedge shaped form. It was covered in countless repeating images of golden Buddhas sitting in meditation posture. The basic structure of the tower was composed of gleaming metallic white metal with translucent grey ribs and patterns running through it. The top of the tower was dominated by an arrangement of globes and umbrellas which looked a variant of the cross between ancient stupa architecture and high tech sensor arrays which seemed so typical of 22nd century architecture.

Chopra matched pace with me and in a low tone said.

‘Rum do this, it reminds me of the look of the graviton pulse emitters on a tethered singularity drive.’

I looked again, he was right. I said nothing, but inside I cursed to myself. ‘Bugger, what is a piece of 27th century space ship technology from Brunswick doing here in the 22nd century?’

Well, I didn’t have time for any further ruminations as we reached a port in the tower and as we entered we were swept up into a whirl of activity. A group of monks ushered us into a lift and instants later the doors opened and we found ourselves staring in perplexity at a scene which should have definitely not greeted us.

‘Don’t keep the Abbottess waiting Please do get out the lift, now,’ Assaji said emphasising the “now”. We did as he asked and walked forward dumb struck.

I could not believe it. We were no longer on Earth. I could not believe my own eyes. We were on Brunswick. There was no room for doubt. The gravity was greater than Earth standard, I felt instantly at home in it. The glaring sun with its strong UV emissions also struck a chord in me that told me it was not Sol but Altair. This was either Brunswick or the most perfect copy possible. Which was it?

Champa whispered to me in an astonished tone. ‘We travelled light years from our previous location in a single step it seemed to me. I think we really are on the planet you call Brunswick orbiting the star Altair.’

Deepa stared around her in astonishment.

‘Chandra, are these mountain ash eucalyptus trees?’

‘Breathe in the scent Deepa, that will tell you the answer.’

The air was fresh with the tang of eucalyptus oil.

‘How lovely,’ Deepa said stopping our forward progress for a moment to savour the scent of a brilliant yellow rhododendron bush that was growing amidst the canopy of gum trees which was mixed with silver birch trees. We were standing in a forest glade on a slightly rising hill side and ahead of us we could see a group of people standing and sitting around a table on a lawn.

Suddenly the breeze shifted and brought a fresh smell to my nose. Somebody was grilling fish on a charcoal fire. My feet quickened and I urged Deepa on. Suddenly I had an inkling of what was going on. My suspicions were confirmed as I saw a dog come bounding over to us and happily barking and wagging its tail brushing up against Deepa’s legs.

‘It’s okay Deepa,’ I said, ‘I reckon we are in the company of old acquaintances on this journey.’ Breaking off from tickling the dog behind its ears Deepa looked up and laughed and said. ‘I think I have an inkling to.’

‘I wish somebody would tell me what was going on.’ Chopra said as we strode up to the group of people. Standing with her back to us was the figure of a woman in nun’s robes who was turning over some fish, sardines I thought, on the grill.

‘Madam Abbottess,’ Assaji said, ‘Here are the visitors.’

The Abbottess turned around and I hung on to Deepa for support as I thought I was going to faint.

‘Cindy?’

‘Hello again Chandra, surprised to see me here?’

‘Surprised is not the word,’ I said feeling as if the world was spinning around me, ‘flabbergasted is the word that comes to mind. Are you Cindy? Are you the Great Goddess?’ I pursed my lips. ‘Just who are you?’

She chuckled, ‘I am the Venerable Abbottess Sthaviraputri in this time frame. But you met me on the Great Vehicle as well in my main role.’ She pointed at what I thought was for a moment a rosary around her neck and then as I looked at it carefully I realised who she was.

‘You are Bhairava’s partner. The programmer?’ I said in wonderment.

Chopra grinned and said, ‘Well its certainly a pleasure to meet again. Is your partner here as well?’

Cindy shook her head and said in a sweet voice. ‘No Bhairava is not here today, and before you ask, I won’t answer any questions about him. His business is his, mine is mine. Assaji, why not help the travellers sit down and get them the refreshments they are waiting for.’ She glanced back at the grill. ‘The fish are almost ready.’

We sat down at a table groaning with food and drink. There were all manner of crisps and crackers, dips and sauces. Grilled vegetables and pastries. Apart from the fish grilling on the barbecue not a trace of any meat was visible.

‘Its all vegetarian.’ Uravashi said with a smile on her face and dipping a cracker in some chickpea dip popped it into her mouth with a happy expression on her face. Suddenly I remembered the time I

had met Cindy on the morning after the discovery on Tau Ceti III, she had been eating and drinking just these sorts of foods too.

Cindy chuckled. ‘I really prefer this sort of thing you know, people insist on offering me meat and flesh and rich offerings, but I much prefer a simple herb tea and a cracker.’ She grinned, ‘Don’t you too, Chandra?’

I nodded, how could I say no?

Deepa frowned staring at Cindy’s necklace.

‘How should we address you? Cindy? Goddess? Abbottess?’

Cindy smiled, ‘Abbottess is fun eh? I like the ring of the term, certainly stirred up the Singhalese no end, bunch of stuffed shirts. “Venerable Abbottess Sthaviraputri” is fine for meetings. Goddess? Let’s leave that right out for now, makes me feel I stick out like a sore thumb. No, while we at this barbecue why not call me Cindy?’

‘Cindy,’ Deepa said with a hint of an edge to her voice, ‘I don’t really mind what you want to call yourself. First, are you going to tell me we are trapped in another rogue simulation program still stuck orbiting Fomalhaut on that portal thing? Second, how are we suddenly light years from where we were? Third, what I really want to know is this. What the hell is going on?’ Deepa shook her head and took a sip of a glass of black tea she had been given a moment earlier.

‘Fourth, Don’t you dare tell me this tea is an illusion, its the first good cup of tea I have had since we had tea with you and Inspector Bhairava.’

‘Ceylonese Luaka tea, my favourite,’ Cindy sipped at her own glass, ‘I prefer it to Bhairava’s choice: Darjeeling. So glad you like it too Deepa.’

She patted the dog who was sitting at her feet and said, ‘So some answers to your questions Deepa. First, this is no illusion and you are not still on the portal. This is Brunswick and you still in the 22nd century, two centuries before Chandra’s ancestors landed here. Second, I enjoy tinkering with devices. I fell in love with Ramdev Ram’s tethered singularity drive when I saw it in Chandra’s ship at the portal. I got to playing around with a copy of it and I suddenly saw that he had a great idea, but he got the whole thing the wrong way round. He used a singularity to move a ship in space. He should have used a singularity to move space in a ship. So I made some alterations

and hey presto! Now the outside of the ship stays in the same place but the inside has moved to somewhere else.’

She paused and shook her head, ‘but like most of my devices I am not sure if it is working quite as I expected. Still I expect I will get it debugged eventually.’

Deepa began tapping her fingers on the table.

Cindy looked up, ‘That was answers one and two and you have got clever Deepa. Your third question is about everything, neat.’

She put down her tea and folded her arms over each other and rested them on the table and leaned on them. Her rosary of beads hung down over the table almost trailing into a plate of honey covered filo pastry cakes, baklavas, I thought.

‘You have met the problem, or at least its representative in Bodh Gaya, Comrade Hui Lee. I am sorry to say I have to admit I seem to have left a bug in the Earth program. I was experimenting with what would be the minimum control parameters. After my experience with Maya I realised that there needed to be some parameters on the loop structure. So I thought I might see what would happen if I set a condition that the program loops through endless suffering. I thought the participants in the program would try and resolve the problem of how to cease suffering by breaking out of the loop. Only I hadn’t thought about what would happen if people thought they could solve the problem by trying to simply eliminate suffering from the loop rather than escaping from the loop itself.’

She bit into a pastry and honey dripped down her fingers.

‘Delicious, do try some, its a new recipe, a cross between baklava and fudge.’

She offered some to Deepa and then continued.

‘Part of the problem was I was experimenting in programming in new languages, Chinese plus, in this case and perhaps I didn’t include the right libraries I suspect. It compiled all right. But its not working as I expected. Hui Lee and her compatriots are about to crash the program it seems in their dedication to eliminating suffering. They seem to believe that suffering alone is the problem, they want to either end suffering in the program or shut the whole thing down. Which was not my intention, especially as the program has not reached its final end state yet. That would take five thousand years from when it began running in 544 BCE.’

Uravashi broke in, '544 BCE? Isn't that the date of...'

'Yes, yes,' said Cindy, 'but lets leave that aside for the moment, the problem is if I reset the program I will have to run it all over again. But, if you as participants can figure out how to get Hui Lee and her gang to not destroy the program it can recover and run to its original end state. So what do you think?'

'Of the cake?' Chopra said washing another mouthful with some more tea.

'No silly fellow, of the problem. Can you or the Yakshis figure out how to solve the problem? Incidentally Champa why don't you and your sisters stop lurking inside your friends and come out an join the party?'

I felt once more the strange sense of emptiness that accompanies a Yakshi spirit separating out from my body and moments later we were all doubled. Luckily, there was plenty of food as the Yakshis all instantly dived into the food.

'Mmm,' Champa said chomping on a slice of musk melon, 'delicious gracious goddess, pardon me Cindy doesn't sound right to me addressing you.'

'Deepa has a point Champa,' Cindy said. 'What you call me doesn't matter in the end. Have you any ideas about the problem?'

Gopika leant over the table and whispered for a moment with Radhika. Then she got up and came round the table and stood beside Champa and bent down and spoke in a whisper into her ear. Champa grinned and said.

'Its worth a try.'

She turned to Cindy and said.

'Why not let us fulfil the condition which Hui Lee wants?'

Deepa frowned, 'are you suggesting eliminating suffering from the loop?'

Champa nodded, 'why not, if we don't they will crash the program, if we do they will let it run but maybe they will see that even if there is no physical suffering they are still trapped in a loop.'

Cindy's eyes lit up and she clapped her hands and laughed. 'What a lovely idea, it would never have occurred to me to patch up the problem that way.'

Deepa said slowly, 'but they will conquer the world, maybe the universe, their lust for power is insatiable it seems to me. What will

happen to Hindustan? Will it become part of the Beijing People's Republic? I don't like the sound of that sounds as if it will just create more suffering.'

I nodded. 'Deepa has a point Champa. Its all well and good saying "eliminate suffering" how can you do it?'

Champa laughed, 'you humans will you never learn? The only reason you can't get things right is you try and do it all on your own. You don't listen to the earth, you don't talk to the sky, you don't see what nature is trying to tell you. That's your problem, you all ways think you can solve the problem on your own. What is with this "Peoples" republic? What of us tree spirits of the East? The water serpents of the West? The wind angels of the North? Even our cousins the earth dwellers of the South? Don't we get a role in the republic? No, we must redefine the problem situation. We will all co-operate with people, the crops will grow at the right time, the rivers flow in the right place, sickness will not occur, there will be no physical suffering. We can eliminate all of that for humanity.'

Chopra grinned, 'Sounds like paradise!'

'Exactly, well said Chopra, it will be paradise but even in this paradise the goddesses basic premise will still stand. It will be a loop. Humans will live, and die. Be born, grow, love, get married, have children, grow old and die. What is more goddess, please make sure that everybody remembers all their past births every time they are born so they realise what is really happening to them.'

Champa looked imploring at Cindy, 'Is this too much to ask?'

Cindy smiled, 'Not in return for what you offer spirits of forest and field, I grant your wish, you may create a paradise on earth. But set three conditions as parameters: first all people who are alive at the beginning of this world will remember all of their past lives in dreams. Second: all people born consequently will be fully conscious of all their conceptions.'

'So you are going to let China conquer the world?' Deepa said drawing in her breath in horror.

A wistful smile played over Cindy's lips. 'I don't think it will matter in this case. Now how will I code "fully conscious of all their conceptions"? hum...'

She stopped, scribbled something on a pad and giggled, 'Oh yes, and the third condition. If your plan works Champa in this program the

participants will eventually renounce the world despite the abolition of avoidable physical suffering. If that happens then when the main program resumes its effects will be shown on the main program. If not, well the whole program will crash anyway, so I won't have lost anything. So let us begin.' Cindy raised her hand as if to snap her fingers.

Deepa put down her empty glass of tea and stared at Cindy and said.

'So, was the tea real?'

'Deepa, it was as real as real can be!'

Cindy giggled and snapped her fingers.

Chapter 7

Right Insight

A flock of geese wheeled in the sky high in the zenith of the heavens. Their white plumage brilliant in the afternoon sunlight against the backdrop of high clouds drifting in from the North. Hui shivered as the wind blew across the plain. The wind was so cold it felt as if it has blown in straight from the sea that lay beyond the endless marshes of the fen land landscape. The breeze rustled in the reed beds and blew in waves across the wild rice fields stretching out to the South. Hui shifted a bit and the rickety wooden platform she was sitting on creaked a bit, the rope bindings chaffing against the planks she had strung up at her back some years ago so she had something to lean against at times like this. A mouse ran across the decking and knocked against a thistle down ball that had lodged in between two planks. It shattered. The thousands of seeds scattered in all directions. Hui looked at it dispersing its seed and laughed to herself as she remembered.

‘Idiots!’ She screamed in horror as she screwed up the communiqué into a ball and hurled it into the corner of the room. She shook her head and cursed under her breath. She had been that close. That close she reckoned to cracking how to open the First Buddha ships and now this. She repented her hasty action and stood up and stepped over to the corner of her office module and bent down and retrieved the ball of paper from the corner. It had fallen near a thistle down ball which had somehow come to rest there as well and as she picked up the screwed up paper the thistle down ball broke scattering its seed everywhere.

She smoothed out the paper at her desk after sitting down again and read in incredulity the message from the Central Council. “Urgent! Dated: Saturday the 22nd of October 2191; Attention: Comrade Hui Lee and cadre members; Subject: Recall to Beijing. Message Body: The Central Council has determined that the so called ‘First Buddha’ technology is of no interest to the people of the republic as it is not Chinese in origin and is therefore worthless. You are ordered to abandon your activities instantly and withdraw from the installations

under Bodh Gaya and return to the mother-land forthwith. Signed, Polit Bureau Head: Hui Neng.’

She checked the signature seal, it was genuine, the chairman’s own seal. This time she tore the message up into tiny bits and putting them in the ashtray set fire to them. Then she lit a cigarette with the same match she had set fire to the message with and took a long drag before she flicked open her comm channel by touching her tongue to her right canine tooth.

‘Comrade Zhu! Prepare to evacuate this installation. Summon all cadre members to station delta four. We are to immediately abandon the attempt to liberate the First Buddha Vehicles.’ She stubbed out the cigarette in the smouldering ashes of the message which had destroyed her greatest aspiration: to render extraordinary service to the revolution. She gathered the remainder of the documents in the module onto the desk in front of her and stepped back. She pulled out a molecular disrupter from her waist belt and aimed it at the desk and the papers piled in a heap on it. It vaporised in a few instants leaving only a trace of grey powder on the floor of the chamber. She shrugged, stamped in the dust, just to make sure it was really done, and spun on the heels of her boots and kicking the door open strode out of the module.

The cadre members, all forty two of them, were lined up by the side of their two personnel carriers. Zhu stood to attention and barked out.

‘All present and correct Comrade Hui Lee!’ Then he dropped into an informal tone. ‘We are leaving? Just like that?’

Hui shrugged and said despondently, ‘Yes, just like that, we drop everything and return home.’

‘So its not all bad eh?’ Zhu said. Hui didn’t really agree, but she couldn’t say so.

They piled into the personnel carriers and set off up the access tunnel they had so brilliantly found. Everything had been brilliant, too bloody brilliant it had turned out. She had been in Gangtok at the monitoring station when she was informed that an extraordinary opportunity to further the revolution was available. A group of monks who claimed bizarrely to be from the future had contacted double agents of the party at Rumtek monastery. They wanted help gaining access to what they claimed were previously unknown alien installations at Bodh Gaya.

Probably the party would have ignored their weird claim if it were not for the fact they seemed to have technology with them the like of which had never been seen before. Such as the molecular disrupter she now carried in her holster. So the cadre had played along with them up to the moment they had shown them how to enter the caverns from a tunnel which led down from a cave in the West side of the Dungeshwari hills. The tunnel had led down into what were obviously military installations under Bodh Gaya.

At that point the utility of posing as Buddhists had ended. She had ordered all of the fools who claimed to be monks from the future eliminated. Their lives served no function any longer as far as she could see. But then she discovered the one fly in the ointment. They could not gain access to the rockets in the cavern. Drills, hammers, explosives, even the disrupter had no effect on the materials they were constructed of. For a brief moment when the crew of an Indian ship claiming to be from the future had entered the caverns and she thought they had a chance. The Abbott had told her that one of the Chinese Patriotic groups from the future, damn, she almost believed the nonsense, had previously gained access to a rocket. So she plotted to get the Indian crew to bring the Chinese Patriotic Leader from the hotel in the town where he was oddly consorting with anti-revolutionary Tibetan forces. Now with victory within her grip: the party ordered the mission aborted. Idiots. She activated the beacon that called for the evacuation craft on stand by in Yunnan to be despatched. They would be recovered by a VTOL craft which could be deployed at supersonic speeds flying below radar cover and would then land at the designated location and retrieve them. She lit a cigarette and offered one to Zhu.

‘Comrade, we must take care when we exit the tunnel shortly. The rendezvous with the recovery vehicle is set for midnight. We must not attract attention before that.’

‘Comrade Hui, that should not be a problem, when we entered the tunnels the area was deserted.’

So the two personnel carriers approached the entrance to the tunnel and stopped.

‘Chun Chun, Huiling, Bao, Xu! Clear the camouflage from the tunnel entrance.’ Zhu shouted out and a team of troops got out of the lead carrier and began to clear away the netting from the entrance.

Then it was 23.40 and the way was clear to proceed to the drop point where they had been told that they would be evacuated from.

They drove out into the deserted and run down industrial estate area that lay to the west of the hills. Mounds of broken glass awaiting recycling and bales of paper and plastics were stacked high in the warehouse yards as they drove towards the designated location. At midnight they arrived at the location, an open square, and waited tensely for the sound of the rescue craft to become audible.

At midnight thirty they were still waiting and Hui knew that they were in trouble. For some reason they were not going to be retrieved it seemed as planned.

‘Comrade Zhu, we will wait until zero two hours thirty and then review the situation.’

Zhu didn’t say anything. He sat in the hatch of the carrier staring out glumly at the industrial units around them illuminated by amber flood lights on towers that were scattered around the area. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes and flipped it open and offered one to Hui. She took it. Although it was against protocol to smoke in the open in a hostile situation she felt she just couldn’t care any longer. All of her hopes and aspirations, her chance to bring about an end to the suffering of the proletariat had been dashed at the last moment.

So together they sat and stared idly into space smoking and watching the way the clouds were drifting across the autumn full moon.

‘Reminds you of the autumn moon festival back home, eh?’ Hui said, thinking of the foods her comrades would prepare in their collective when they celebrated this event.

‘Moon cakes would be nice now,’ Zhu said wistfully.

‘Moon cakes?’ She thought to herself, yes they were just what she wanted now.

Absorbed in thoughts of home they both quite forgot that they were also supposed to be keeping watch. It was with horror then that she saw that a group of people had not only entered the square but were also now approaching the personnel carriers.

‘Zhu!’ She hissed, ‘we have visitors.’

Zhu turned his face from the moon and tossed his cigarette away over the side of the craft and shouldered his rifle. Hui did likewise. She opened a comm channel and alerted the other craft. For a tense

moment they waited expecting to be attacked. One of the figures began to raise its arm. It looked as if they were about to open fire. Hui was a soldier her training told her what she had to do.

‘Open fire!’ She screamed as her rifle cracked with the sound of bullets flying from it. Zhu did the same and so did the defenders of the other personnel carrier. The enemy fell like flies. Hui sensed something was wrong, there was no answering fire at all.

‘Cease fire!’ She yelled out and their guns fell silent. The square seemed to echo to the silence. One of the figures lying on the ground dragged itself half up and called out.

‘Comrades!’ Hui drew in a breath, the speaker was Chinese, there was something dreadfully wrong.

‘Comrades,’ the figure moaned, ‘we were coming to bring you the news of the revolution.’

Hui shook her head and shivered in horror, was this a revolutionary cadre here in Bodh Gaya? How was this possible? Had their own comrades fallen victim to friendly fire?

She jumped out of the hatch and ran over to the fallen figures. Some were stirring now and looking around with wild eyes. Others lay like discarded dolls left scattered on the pavement by an errant child, never more to take part in the game of life again.

It was then she saw and gasped in horror: their attackers had not been troops, nor yet the gangsters which roamed this area. She could see only women and children. She stared in agony and tears welled from her eyes. Rather than weapons they seemed to be have been carrying garlands of flowers and platters of fruit and food in bowls.

‘Comrade,’ the one who had spoken to her first moaned. She saw it was a man dressed in a now blood stained dark blue uniform of the Peoples Liberation Army.

‘I am sorry your hasty actions have led to the death of innocent mothers and daughters of the revolution. You will have the luxury of living with your grief, I sense that I will not.’

He choked and blood trickled from his lips. ‘My name is General Chang. News was relayed to me that I could aid you in liberating the alien ships. I was on my way to join you in this heroic endeavour when I received orders recalling your own mission, and mine as well. As I and comrade Vera...’

He broke off for a moment and brushed the hair from the face of a woman who had fallen beside him and was staring blankly at the stars above. He gently closed her eyes.

‘We were rushing here to the designated point for pickup when we met this group of women from the local MCC commune. They informed me that a spontaneous uprising of people all over the world had been taking place during the last few hours. The nations of the world have declared their support for the proletariat struggle led by the Beijing Peoples Republic. The ultimate and inevitable triumph of socialism has finally arrived.’

Hui threw caution to the winds and broke comm silence and linked to the master server in Beijing via the troop carrier’s transponder.

She couldn’t believe her ears. It was true, a spontaneous uprising all over the world. The liberation of humanity, the establishment of the universal soviet.

Hui lent down and took the man’s hand in hers.

‘I am so sorry comrade, in the moment of victory joy has been snatched from our grasp by my grievous error.’

Chang stared her in the eyes and quietly said.

‘It is so simple that nobody understands it, I forgive you your error...’

He coughed up more blood and his chest spasmed. His last words were.

‘Daughter of the revolution, forgive yourself, you did not kill me, the revolution killed me.’

Hui was not sure if she could forgive herself, nor yet what the error really was.

‘It is so simple that nobody understands it.’ She repeated to herself, had he meant socialism? Or something else?

In a matter of moments the scene was transformed. Somehow the floodlights on the towers in the industrial estates around them became like sad moon lanterns at a funeral. There should she felt have been the strains of the red flag being sung; patriotic songs of solidarity and the inevitable triumph of the people over capitalism. The welcoming garland were strewn over the corpses like funeral wreaths. The fruits and foods transformed from a victory feast into offerings to the departed souls of the slain. Pointless martyrs in the endless struggle

for the cessation of suffering. The wind stirred and sighed in the pylons and wires around the square. The wires vibrated in the silence.

She almost fancied she could hear a woman singing in a clear limpid tone that seemed to soar into the sky linking the lantern lit tableau to the great autumn moon riding high in the sky. She seemed to be singing.

‘It is so simple that nobody understands it.’

All over the world, except for in that square it seemed, the first festival of the autumn moon revolution was being celebrated.

But all that Hui felt was emptiness.

A gust of a fresh breeze from the East tugged a lock of her grey hair across her lined face. Hui chuckled to herself and drew her cloak tighter around her body to keep off the wind which seemed to chill her to the bone this afternoon.

Nearby she could see a heron perched on the remains of a broken down tower from a great suspension bridge which had once spanned the river not far from where she had made her home these last few years. The heron sat as impassively as Hui herself. It was waiting for the fish to jump out of the water. Hui wasn't waiting for anything. She just sat.

She remembered. After the nightmare of the encounter at first the trip across the plains of Northern India had seemed like a dream come true. Everywhere they were welcomed by the communes that had been established. They were heroes, just because they were representatives of the glorious People's Liberation Army. They were wined, dined, feted and lauded at function after function. Marigold petals seemed to end up constantly strewn on the floor of their vehicles, their gun turrets were decked with flowers and smeared with red vermilion powder. Their clothes smelled sweetly of jasmine and sandalwood from all of the perfumes that were lavished on them at welcoming functions.

But then the other side of the dream began to become apparent to people. It began in dreams themselves for most people. Everybody, every night, dreamed vivid dreams: disturbing dreams. At first Hui put her own dreams down to the elation of the revolution and her sorrow at her grievous error at the end. Then she began to wonder.

The first night she dreamt she was a soldier who had been drafted into the imperial Roman army and who had had to leave his rural

homelands and tramp the endless highways of the empire. Only to die in vain ambushed by barbarians in a swamp somewhere. She had died shot through the heart by an arrow. When she died she felt a sense of deep frustration that her life had been in vain and benefited nobody. She had given voice to her sorrow by calling out to her attackers, 'I meant no harm to you!'

The second night she had dreamt she was a musician in a middle European city in the late 18th century. She had just begun to gain fame in her home town when it had been besieged. She dreamt she died in agony crushed by a beam that fell from the ceiling during an enemy bombardment one night. She felt a deep sense of regret as she died in that dream that she had never found peace in her life.

The third night she refused to go to sleep at first at all, and lay awake smoking and reading until nearly dawn. But, then she had slipped into dreams despite her desperate longing to never dream again.

In her dream she was a merchant from Asia Minor in classical times who set out on a sea voyage from the red sea along the African coast. But in a great storm the ship was driven off course and ended up beaching on the Indian coast at Cambay. It turned out in the dream to be a stroke of luck. Her stock of gems was worth more here than they would have in Africa. She made a small fortune overnight. She began to prosper and in time grew used to the heat and dust of Hindustan. In time she married a local merchant and settled down and bore three children who grew and became the joy of her life. The years passed and she came more and more to see the futility of worldly pursuits. She was drawn to the Dharma and eventually gave up the householder life and became a nun. She and her community dwelt in cave temples and monasteries carved into the hills of Western India. She was blessed with long life, good health and serenity. She developed a deep contemplative practice. She died while sitting in contemplation on the balcony of her monastery by the light of the setting sun. She died suffused by a sense of universal loving kindness for all living beings.

Hui woke with a start. Zhu was shaking her shoulder.

'Comrade Hui!' You must wake up it is past dawn we must be moving.' He paused, 'Perhaps if we can get to the mountains today we can get out of this weird fever that is affecting everybody.'

'What fever?'

‘The dreams, aren’t you having them to? Everybody is dreaming that they are remembering past lives.’ He looked at her eyes and sighed.

‘You are too, I can see, you have the haunted look like everybody else in your eyes.’

As we drove through the first foothills of the Himalayas and left behind the plains I saw all around me people were sitting or standing in fields, rivers, roads, wherever they were, and staring in perplexity around them. Many people were falling back into attempts to propitiate superstitious deities and worshipping or performing rituals.

‘What are they doing do you think Zhu?’ I asked as we drove past a group of women standing in a river dressed in brilliant saris and alternately dipping into the water and then standing up again.

‘They are trying to propitiate the spirits I think, asking to be liberated from the dreams that everybody is seeing.’

‘Do you think it might work?’ I asked, hoping it might somehow.

‘Something has to work, lets see if they get relief.’ Zhu shuddered. ‘I had a bad life last night in my dream. I was a barbarian who dwelt in some kind of a great swamp in a Northern waste land. We were invaded by some kind of army that sought to take away our freedom. I joined a resistance group and we attacked a group of the enemy from the rushes in a swamp. We killed many of the enemy, I shot one through the heart with an arrow, but the enemy counter attacked and we were routed. I was captured and impaled on a stake. Hui, you can’t imagine the feeling of dying like that.’

I stared in horror at Zhu.

‘You shot one of them through the heart with an arrow?’

‘Yes the poor bastard died crying something out that is haunting me now.’

I shuddered, ‘What did he say?’

‘I meant no harm to you!’

It was then that I knew that the dreams were no dreams.

I issued amphetamine pills to all of the group and told them all to avoid sleep at all costs until we reached the motherland. We drove on in a sleepless state that became almost as disturbing as the dreams themselves.

We passed through the Kathmandu valley. The Nepal National Soviet was urging people to be patient and said that scientists were heroically working night and day to find a cure to the condition. I

envied them working night and day, they didn't have to sleep. Still things were not all bad. The harvest was shaping up to be bountiful and there were no shortages of any goods as the bourgeois traders who had obstructed the free movement of commodities were now a thing of the past.

Again though we saw groups of people trying to deal with their dreams by propitiating their ancient gods. The streets were awash with blood in places where they were sacrificing buffaloes and goats in an attempt to appease the spirits who were sending the dreams. I knew now it was in vain. The dreams were no dreams, but memories of what we had actually done in past lives.

We didn't even have to worry about transiting though Tibet which had declared that the decision to side with the Southern Kingdom had been an error and announced its allegiance to the People's Republic in Beijing.

In Lhasa the Tibetan People's Revolutionary Council was celebrating the arrival of numerous shipments of grain from the Yunnan Autonomous Region which had suddenly ended the food shortages which plagued the area.

That night after eating and drinking at a great banquet in the hall of the people I made the mistake of falling asleep.

I dreamed, I remembered, I lived. I was born in Szechwan province in nineteen thirty. I joined the long march. I experienced the elation of the revolution's final triumph when I was nineteen. I had never know such joy it seemed to me in my dream. I married and settled down on a commune. Then in nineteen fifty nine I was drafted again into the army and sent with a task force into Tibet to liberate it from its feudal landlords. I was full of revolutionary zeal, I was possessed by a vision of the victory of the proletariat over the feudal system. I was with a force that stormed a stronghold of the anti-revolutionary forces. I found myself smashing images, kicking in cabinets and chasing the monks around the courtyards until in an orgy of violence we beat to death the leaders of the anti-revolutionary faction.

Yet as I took part in this I remembered as well being a nun in Western India in the remote past. I remembered the truth of the Dharma's teachings, and contrasted them with the slogans of the revolution I was screaming as I was kicking an old Tibetan monk to death.

I screamed silently in my dream. I wanted to stop what I was doing. But I couldn't alter my actions in the dream. I committed atrocities believing my actions were justified in the struggle. It was sickening. Even in the dream I began to question my actions. I returned to my commune and tried to forget what had happened. But I was haunted by what I had done. One night I could stand it no longer and climbed to the top of a mountain crag. I leaped from the crag. As I fell in terror through the air unable to stop my fall I felt my heart fail as I thought. 'May this sacrifice of my life be some small recompense for the errors of my life.'

I woke with a start. I was bathed in sweat, my heart was pounding. It was horrible. Nor yet did waking help at all. For unlike a dream the more I woke up the more the horror of my past life sank in.

I got up and wandered out of the room and down the corridor. I found Zhu's room and knocked and went inside. He was sitting up in bed with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms clasped around his legs. His sobbing was inconsolable. I held him in my arms, he held me in his, together we lay in that cold bed and wept until the morning broke. I didn't ask what he had dreamed, I didn't want to know. I just prayed he had not been the old monk I had gleefully kicked to death in my misplaced zeal.

Next day we were told we could leave our transport vehicles in Lhasa and get flights back home. Vast new deposits of fuel oil had just been found in Manchuria and in return for mutual development rights the Japanese Peoples Republic were going to supply aviation fuel at cost to the Beijing republic.

Sitting on the plane I stared out the window at the clouds drifting by the window as we flew over Southern China towards Shanghai and home.

'What do you think of this name "The Universal Republic"?' Zhu said, putting down his copy of the in flight magazine and sipping on a glass of Champaign.

I stared at the magazine and saw a list of proposed names for the soon to be merged Peoples Republics of the World. The Russians were proposing, not very inspired really, "The Soviet Union". I doubted people would go for that. The Beijing committeemen were proposing "The Universal Republic". Personally I liked the suggestion of the French Council "The Ultimate Internationale". However, I

doubted any of them stood a chance in the light of the suggestion made by the Southern kingdom, “The Autumn Moon Revolution”. Turned out I was right as well, when the world voted later in the year we became citizens of the Autumn Moon Revolution.

Hui smiled. She must be dreaming of that moment she realised as the moon was even now rising above the horizon to the East as the evening fell. Those had been good years the dawn of the Autumn Moon Revolutionary state. How many children has she had? It was the twins wasn't it? No problem. No more one child policy. Now that the crops seemed to be growing well the state abandoned the one child policy. She had had twins: a son and a daughter. Chang and Vera. Somehow she had hoped family life would make up for the horror of the dreams that plagued the night side of life under the Autumn Moon.

Gradually people got used to the dreams and become reconciled with the suffering they had experienced in past lives. After all now that the revolution had happened it seemed that suffering in the present was a thing of the past. The world economy was progressing by leaps and bounds. Trade flowed freely from commune to commune, soviet to soviet and between the continents and communities of the world. The crops bloomed better than ever before previously untold resources of oil and gas were constantly being discovered. When the great oil and gas fields of Java and Sumatra were discovered overnight it seemed the price of oil and gas dropped to almost nothing and energy supply become limited only by the aspirations of the consumers. Increasingly as well strains of new self seeding crops were developed which were disease free and needed no fertilisers. The scientists also said the new crops seemed to have great health giving qualities and it became rare to hear of sickness or illness. As the years rolled by people got used to the idea that sickness was a thing of the past. In physical, social and economic terms the sky was the limit it seemed for humanity.

But the children of the revolution were different from any previous generation of humanity. Literally. Hui smiled at a mosquito which was biting her leg and wished it well and was happy to grant it a meal of her blood. Yes the children had been different, so different.

She had named her son and daughter Chang and Vera in memory of the man and women who had almost led her to victory in her life before the revolution. Zhu had smiled as he looked with love upon the

realisation of his dreams: a wife and two children. She had looked at the twins lying in her arms on her lap in the maternity ward and smiling up at her and wondered what they were thinking.

She could never have guessed and little Chang and Vera's vocal chords were still not developed enough to allow them to tell her. Later they told her and she realised what she and every other mother of the first born of the revolution should have known.

The twins had been only a few months old when she found out. Vera was lying in her cot and she was playing with Chang and alternately kissing and blowing on his stomach and then picking him up in her hands and flying him up into the air and saying, "pretty baby boy, whose mother's baby boy then? Whee!"

When she heard somebody say, 'Me too please! Its my turn next!'

Hui looked around. Who had spoken? Then she heard.

'Don't stop that was fun Hui.'

She looked in shocked silence at little baby Chang. She could have sworn he had spoken. She shook her head, this maternity business was getting to her. Then it happened again.

'Hui! Its my turn whizz me too won't you?' She looked closely at Vera, the words seemed to be coming from her mouth. Then at Chang. He smiled at her and said.

'Hui, don't be worried but there is something you should know, we are your children, but we are more than just your children.'

Vera grinned and waved her fingers in the air and wailed.

'Chang! We weren't going to tell her yet we had learned to speak.'

Chang clenched and unclenched his tiny hands and replied.

'Well you started it saying "Me too please", its your fault.'

'No its not.'

'Yes it is.'

Hui shook her head and blinked and took a deep breath.

'Stop it you two, I don't understand this, you are tiny babies. How can you speak like adults, if in somewhat squeaky voices I must say.'

Vera giggled, 'We remember who we were in all our past lives Hui.'

Hui frowned, she was either going mad or there was something very wrong here.

'So who are you?'

Vera shook her head, 'I am not sure Hui, I remember so many lives, ten thousand lives or more, my names are numberless as the sands of

the Ganges. In recent lives I have been men and women, farmers and traders, low and high born.’ She paused and in eyes that held an expression that ill fitted an infants tiny face said.

‘In my last life my name was Vera Chang.’

Hui shuddered.

‘Vera?’ She felt her hairs stand on end.

‘Then I am...’

‘You are both my murderer and my mother in subsequent lives, odd eh?’

Hui turned away from a voice that somehow spoke of things beyond comprehension. She turned for comfort to little Chang. It couldn’t be?

Chang shook his head to the best of his abilities and whispered.

‘I am so sorry Hui that your idyll of motherhood should be broken this way. But we could not maintain the pretence of being innocent children any longer.’

He looked to one side and said.

‘We in the bodies of infants, but our consciousnesses are those of beings who have lived in all of the ten thousand things of the world. I have lived a thousand lives: a daughter of the wolf pack; a son of the eagles flying high above the mountains; a salmon forging my way upstream in the highland torrent; a kitten lazing by the fire; a cockroach revelling in a rubbish heap.’

Chang spat and spit dribbled down his face.

‘Some lives are better than others it seems.’ He laughed, ‘Cockroach or king, in the end its always the same it seems.’

‘But not this time.’ Vera whispered and grabbed hold of Hui’s blouse with her tiny hand.

‘Mother Hui, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving birth to me. It hurts so much. I know from the millions of times I have given birth. I know its dangers too from all the times I have died in labour. Oh the horror of that death. But you should know that one pain is worse than a mother’s in labour.’

‘What do you speak of my child?’ Hui instinctively picked up Vera seeing her as an infant in distress and held her to her breast and soothed her brow. Vera looked up contentedly at her and in her deep brown eyes Hui saw a deep sorrow.

‘The only pain worse that childbirth, is being born itself.’

‘You experienced the birth fully conscious?’ Vera nodded.

Hui shuddered, she looked down at Chang and said. 'You too?'

Chang nodded and said, 'actually the birth wasn't that bad I thought. The pain was intense, the sense of contraction and compression unpleasant. Squeezing through the cervix I thought my head would explode for a moment. But then I felt the air and somebody slapped me and breath filled my lungs. It felt good. But there was one thing.'

Hui wept thinking of what it must have been like for her babies to have been born as fully conscious adult mentalities. Her tears fell onto Vera's tiny cheeks and Vera cried with her, their tears mingling. Vera said, 'Donald darling what was worse for you.'

Hui started and stared down at Vera. 'What did you call Chang?'

Vera frowned, 'bugger me and my big mouth, Hui, in Chang's last life his name was Donald and we were husband and wife.'

'Not... ' Hui sighed. Chang nodded and said. 'Hui, the fault was not yours it was the revolution's, I bear you no ill will for shooting me. I have died many deaths more horrible than that, you murdered me mercifully mother dear. Do not weep for the pain of death.'

But Hui wept despite her infants assurance of the futility of her tears. She wept more still when Chang told her of what really horrified him. The pain of conception. He had never experienced conception and pre-birth consciousness before this time. But this time he experienced rebirth he was conscious from the moment of conception. He was filled with sorrow. He had glimpsed an instant even from before conception. In it he had felt drawn by forces he could not grasp from a luminous state of oneness with everything into the universe to the world of the womb. In the womb he had suffered in a pain that was a kind of fiery energy in which he burned night and day. With every cell division he felt his primal unity further broken and tormented. Over and over again the fire of division racked his every pore and there was no end it seemed to the suffering. For nine months he had lain in her womb, sometimes floating in a sea of blissful serenity, but at bad times burning with the fire of cell division. It was he said the greatest suffering he had ever experienced. He finished his story by saying.

'No more will I suffer in that way, no more will I take rebirth in this world, this much I know.'

Hui sobbed and heard through her tears little tiny Vera say.

‘Well said Donald, for me the birth was worth than the womb, but for me also I am set upon an end to this endless cycle of birth and death. I have seen the force that builds the world, and I know now how the suffering can truly cease.’

Hui was not the only mother who wept bitter tears that year. All of the mothers of the revolution were cheated it seemed of their children. For the infants were no children. As soon as they could speak they revealed their true natures. As soon as they could walk they began to move around unlike infants in a calculated manner.

None were interested in learning. They knew more than adults. They remembered everything that they had learned in every life they had lived. They spoke every language, knew every skill, remembered all of history better than any history book ever written. Knew more of how a family functioned than their parents for whom this was the first time in this life they had had children.

As soon as the children were able to care for themselves they began to withdraw from the company of the adults. For they knew something else that they did not tell their parents. They had seen how to end the suffering of humanity. It was not the solution of the Buddha’s way, but it would work. They would all renounce the world. There would be no more rebirth for a simple reason. There would be no more birth.

The end was swift. In a generation before her eyes Hui had watched humanity quietly withdraw from its traditional concerns. While the fields bloomed of their own accord and the world experienced a prosperity it had longed for throughout the history of mankind: it was meaningless for the children of the autumn moon. They saw through everything. One day Chang came to her and told her he was leaving home. Physically he was barely a youth beginning his first steps as an adolescent. Mentally he was something else.

‘Mother Hui, the time has come for me to leave you now. I am going to the forest to seek the true deathless state.’

She looked at him, in the prime of youth and said.

‘Chang, I don’t understand do you not feel the fire of youth in your veins? Do you not long to know what life can bring. Life love and happiness?’

Chang smiled and laughed.

‘Mother, countless times beyond number have I played the game of life. Why should I now repeat again the drama? I know the plot, it holds no magic for me any longer.’

Hui could think of only one thing that had she always thought made adolescents want to become adults in the last resort. She wanted to understand what her son felt of this basic drive of humanity.

‘Chang. Can you live without knowing love? Don’t you long for the passion of a woman’s embrace. For the heat of the night and its ecstasy.’

Chang chuckled and shrugged.

‘Hui, I know all of that already, from every angle that humanity could ever know. What is more we know everybody.’

Hui frowned, what did he mean?

‘In what sense do you know everybody? What do you mean?’

Chang sighed and told her the secret which lay at the heart of the paradox the children faced.

‘Who can I love? My mother? My father? My son? My daughter? There is nobody who I meet who has not been in one life or another related to me by birth. Hui, I cannot couple with those who have all been at one time my own mother. It would be as repugnant as sleeping with you. As likely to cause suffering.’

He paused and added in a whisper.

‘Believe me mother, for I have done all of that too and more. Do not ask me to wander in that error any longer. I am not ashamed of what I did in ignorance, but I cannot do it again the whole world is my mother I cannot sleep with my mother.’

Vera had crept into the room and she put her arms around Hui’s shoulder and hugged her and said.

‘Nor yet I, or any of the other children of the autumn moon. Not only have I been the partner of all other spirits in at least one of my countless births, but I have sometimes loved the same person countless times. I have seen them suffer and die time after time in sickness and ill health. Do not ask me to suffer that agony again of losing my loved one yet again for no reason.’

Hui tried another way to persuade the children to not renounce the world.

‘But famine and plague are a thing of the past, see the world is now a paradise on earth. I can understand somebody renouncing suffering. But, why would you renounce paradise?’

Chang took her hand and smiled. ‘Hui, the world is an abode of suffering. Even though the fields may blossom of their own accord and the land flow with milk and honey. Still the truth is that the endless cycle itself is the essence of suffering. Heaven or hell, this world remade in the image of paradise, or the old world of suffering: it makes no difference in the end. I am done with the play of life, I have seen the cause of suffering plainly. It is just this: desire and longing for life that causes rebirth and the desire for existence and non-existence both alike. I have realised the truth and I renounce the cause of suffering and I know there is a way to end the suffering. It is the path that we the children of the autumn moon have resolved to follow. Do not weep with sorrow, let your tears be tears of joy.’

Hui would have liked to believe her tears were tears of joy as she and Zhu watched the column of silent children wend its way from the doors of the houses and apartments of the city and set out to the forest beyond the habitations of men. But in truth her tears were bitter.

Forever weeping she left home too and wandered the world seeking solace from her sorrow. The remote controlled jet planes that were the last swan song of humanities technological aspirations still ran then criss-crossing the globe.

Everywhere it was the same. The revolution was hollow robbed of its future by the truth. She visited the forest communities of the children of the revolution. They dwelt in harmony with nature. Quiet contemplative communities in which the children grew old before their years lay heavy on their shoulders.

Once she had been in a forest in Eastern Australia. There she came upon a group of the children of the revolution, now in their forties, who sat unperturbed on a hilltop alternately lashed by the rains and baked by the sun of the savage southern skies. She had asked one of them.

‘Wouldn’t you be more comfortable meditating inside somewhere?’

The meditator stirred from his contemplation and opened his eyes and stared at her.

‘Mother, where is there to be inside?’

‘I mean inside, sheltered from sun and the storms.’

The figure smiled and reached out his hand and touched her heart and whispered.

‘Mother, we take refuge in the deathless state in which there is no sun, no storm, no burning heat, no freezing cold, no birth, no suffering old age and death. Come on in too and you can shelter from the true storm. The storm of life.’

Hui couldn’t listen and ran from that place back to the airport. The homes of men were becoming deserted but still the automated technology ran. She ran to, from continent to continent searching for an answer to why none of the children were interested in life. Here and there she met other seekers like herself.

The years had past and the numbers of humanity dwindled. In Northern countries where there had been many more old people than young the cities emptied quicker. In Southern countries the pace of the end was slower to begin with and then quickened as the years passed.

As she approached her seventies she thought of a new way to explore what was happening to her. She sought to trace the physical locations of all the past births she had remembered in her dreams. It took years to find where she lived in all of her lives. Sometimes the locations looked similar. Sometimes the landscapes were altered beyond belief by the works of man and the relentless force of time’s onward march.

Finally she had tracked down the land in which her first memory of a past life had come from. It seemed she had been born in her first dream after the revolution in the fen lands in the East of England. Once in her childhood they had been drained agricultural farmlands. Now the technology was breaking down.

She arrived in Cambridge in the winter of 2289. The weather was wild at Marshall’s airport when her flight landed. She could see the terminal buildings were showing signs of decay. Hardly any people were left in the UK now and the automated systems and machinery were rapidly breaking down now. She walked out of the terminal to find the automated taxi service had failed and she would have to walk. She set off along the highway towards the town centre. Sycamore trees were springing up amidst the blackberry trees and elder thickets which lined the deserted streets. She had forded the river Cam where the remains of Magdelene bridge lay collapsed into the slow flowing

muddy river waters. Not knowing where to go she had climbed the hill by the river and sat upon the grassy knoll at its top.

All around the forest was reclaiming the city. The spires of churches still poked through the green canopy. Like gaunt memorials to a culture now fading like a memory of a dream. She camped in the ruins of an ancient Saxon church that still stood below the hill crest.

That night a great storm blew up in the North sea. The waters were driven from afar onto the shore and the tides conspired with the winds to raise the levels above the limits of the sea walls on the wash. The dams fell, the sea rushed in to reclaim what was rightly part of its domain. Man's conquest of the fen lands was over.

In the morning she had climbed the hill again as the clouds lifted after the storms and seen a different landscape. She was still in the forest, but now the sea stretched from the horizon to near the city to the East. The light on the water fascinated her. She left the city behind and walked until she came to a place called on a sign hidden in the blackberry bushes by the road, Waterbeach. Once again the name spoke the truth it was the last land before the marshes and the sea began. It was as far as she could go on foot. She gathered together materials and made a shelter for herself by the river estuary and settled down.

In time the rushes and reeds grew high around her and the landscape transformed before her eyes into the form she had glimpsed in her vision of her life in the remote past. The endless fens stretched infinite and vast beneath a great sky. Three years ago she had built this platform for herself so she could observe the ever changing panoply of cloud forms in the heavens. She had developed a theory that perhaps if she studied nature herself she might understand what was happening. It was to be honest as good a theory as any. Nor yet had she met anybody else now for years with any other viewpoints so she sat and watched the sky.

She gazed out at the moon riding high in the sky and felt the cold damp fen wind blowing and chilling her bones to the marrow.

An owl hooted in the night and moor-hens in the rushes called their plaintive cries. The moonlight glinted in the waters and Hui stared at the reflection of the moon in the mere below her platform.

'Wonder how many other people are looking at this autumn moon eh?' She thought to herself as her consciousness ebbed away and

became so attenuated it was barely more present than the photons of moon light scattering on the molecules of the water's surface.

She died never knowing the answer to her last question. She was the only woman gazing upon the autumn moon that night. She had been the last person alive in the world.

Chapter 8

Right Contemplation

On the Starship Monaro: 21/10/2645 14:54

Steam puffed from the iron as I pressed the button on its top and I smoothed it over the collar of the shirt. I looked carefully at the fabric and decided it was smooth enough now. Turning around I took the shirt and slipped it on and then put the hanger back on the rack in the cupboard. Closing the door I looked again at the label on a panel below a black and white check strip. It said, “BSPS Monaro locker 2834.384”. For a moment I wondered what the BSPS meant then I realised of course it stood for Brunswick State Police Spaceship. Just like a state official I thought to label every locker on a ship with an identification code. I paused to fold up the ironing board and slipped it back into its housing between the cupboard and the sink unit and the catch closed with a clunk as it slipped into place.

I looked in the mirror. My hair was shorter than it had been for while now. Hardly longer than a short fuzz covering my skull, a regulation spacer cut. I reached up and felt my naked chin smooth under my touch. Dam it was good to be clean shaven again, it felt good. I checked my contacts were in okay. I flicked my tongue over my teeth and noted that the head up displays were all functioning normally. All systems were reporting optimal status. Finally. I tugged on my shirt tails to straighten the way my shirt was sitting on my body. I smiled, I had lost a little weight I reckoned. I looked good, I felt good. Good, I thought, lets go and get this over with. I slipped on my leather flight jacket and cap and turned and opening the door to my quarters strode out into the corridor. I took no notice of the panel on my door that said, ‘Acting Inspector Dr Chandra Gupta: BSPS Monaro’.

The lighting in the corridor was bright and crisp and as I stood on the centre walk way and was carried along the travelator I looked at what was going on all around me. People were scurrying in both directions. Some in uniform, some in civilian clothes. Most were obviously set on reaching their destination as quickly as possible, but some were slowly strolling along. I saw a tall blond haired man deep

in conversation with a red headed woman a head shorter than himself. They were both waving in the air in front of them. Pointing at virtual displays on their head up contacts I reckoned. I thought I recognised the woman. I had met her at a conference on exobiology a couple of years back on Wu-Tai hadn't I? I was still pondering whether it was Wu-Tai or Australis IV where I had met her when I got to the lift.

The travelator stopped as its molecular structure flowed from a mobile to a static state at the end of the designated pathway. I found my self standing on the deck and stepped away from the walkway so that nobody following me would run into me. I looked down at my boots standing there on the gleaming gun metal grey corridor floor. Bright and shiny. I decided I actually looked ridiculous in this get up. The shirt was stiff, the collar constrained my neck, the boots too shiny. I would be happy to get this over with.

The lift disgorged me onto the promenade deck and I stepped forward into bright lights and the flickering of flash lights going off in front of me. One of the journalists pushed forward and holding a microphone in front of my face said.

'Hobart Morning Star: Did you meet the First Buddha aliens? Are the aliens you met friendly? What is the Buddhas attitude to humanity? Is it true that you met gods?'

I raised my eyebrows, 'Respectively: no, yes, I am not sure, I have no idea.'

Suddenly questions rained down like a shower of arrows unleashed on me.

'Brisbane Mail: Were you responsible for the destruction of Tau Ceti?'

'Brunswick Age: Is there really an alien space port on Earth?'

'Altair Sun: Did you actually see the Earth Destroyed?'

'Sydney Sentinel: What is in the portal at Fomalhaut?'

'Interplanetary Enquirer: Are the gods real?'

'Namaste!: Did you meet the Buddha's wife?'

A couple of burly security officers quickly intervened and pushed back the journalists. Ahead of me I could see a raised dais on which a group of figures were already standing. I climbed up the stairs and smiled at Deepa who was dressed in a deep blue sari with a white border and who looked immaculate, as neat as a new pin. She looked me up and down and grinned and whispered, 'Nice.'

She was standing next to a tall figure in a military uniform who for a moment I did not recognise and then she turned round and put her hand out and grabbed mine in a strong grip.

‘Good to see you again Chandra.’

‘You too,’ I checked the stars on her epaulettes and said, ‘General Natasha?’

‘General Maguire actually, but General Natasha sounds just fine to me.’

She turned indicating the woman next to her and said, ‘You remember of course.’

I grinned and said, ‘Don’t tell me your a general as well Tara?’

She chuckled, ‘No hope mate, forget it, I’m Senator Tara Kern now, you wouldn’t catch me going into the defence forces.’ She winked at Natasha, ‘No offence mate.’

‘None taken,’ Natasha said, ‘Now I reckon we are about ready to begin this shindig.’

She turned and stood in front of a podium and we lined up behind her. Myself, Deepa, Chopra, Uravashi and Tara.

She tapped the microphone, a traditional gesture indicating the start of an event like this, and silence spread out like a ripple from the sound of her fingertips on the mike.

‘Honoured Senator Tara Kern for the planet of Brunswick; Commissioner Deepa Bharati, Inspectors Chopra and Uravashi of the New Hindustan Police; Dr Chandra Gupta acting Inspector on the Brunswick State Police; Ladies and gentlemen, members of the press.’ She paused and looked around and added, ‘That should about cover it I reckon unless there are any mongrels out there amongst you.’

The crowd rippled with a kind of nervous humour for a moment and then Natasha said. ‘We are gathered here today to honour those who have made an extraordinary contribution to our knowledge of the universe.’ She paused and said quietly.

‘Two years ago Dr Chandra and his crew left Brunswick on the research vessel Garuda to investigate an alien artefact orbiting Fomalhaut. Two weeks ago Commissioner Deepa Bharati witnessed the destruction of the solar system and pursued the criminals responsible to the vicinity of the alien artefact at Fomalhaut. Two days ago she, Dr Gupta, and officers Chopra and Uravashi appeared at

a picnic ground in the hills outside of Kallista on Brunswick with a most extraordinary set of claims.'

She glanced around the room and chuckled. 'To be honest we reckoned they were one sandwich short of a picnic when they first turned up. But...' She suddenly increased the volume and depth of her tone. 'They were not having us on. In particular their claim that the Earth had been restored struck us as extraordinary. We sent for data immediately via sub space probes and found out they were telling the truth. What is more not only has the Earth and Solar system been somehow recreated where only a fortnight ago there was the dying embers of a supernova. But, the Earth itself appears to have never experienced a nuclear war.' She lightly tapped on the podium as if calling everybody to attention.

'Friends, there is still a lot we need to learn, but it is clear that it is imperative that once we get this medal giving ceremony out of the way the first thing to do is to scoot off to the solar system and take a look to see what is going on.'

She leant down and gestured to an assistant who stepped up on the dais carrying a tray of medals. 'So let's get on with this you guys.'

'Inspector Uravashi Mishra, on behalf of the State of Brunswick I award you this Star of Honour.'

She paused evidently trying to decide where to pin it onto her sari and then shrugged and handed it to her saying, 'Go on dear figure out where to wear it please.'

She passed along the line. 'Inspector Yash Chopra, you know the drill, here is a Star of Honour for you mate too. Want me to pin it on you?' Chopra shrugged. 'Good on you mate.' Natasha said handing him the medal.

Next it was Tara's turn. Natasha looked down at her pad for a moment. 'You pollies get medals for everything I reckon. This one is for outstanding contributions for exploration for your part in the original Tau Ceti III mission. Nice, I reckon I should give myself one too.' She grinned and handed Tara her meddle and whispered. 'Fair go, you really deserve it never mind my joshing eh?'

She stood in front of me. 'Chandra mate, I've got a couple of stars of honour for you too. One for a belated recognition of your success at Tau Ceti III and one for your current effort in restoring the Earth.

Now according to my secretary I have just been told that your name means moon, is that right?’

I nodded, Chandra was of course Hindi for moon.

‘Hum, in which case you are about to become the moon and stars my friend.’

I smiled, she smiled, we grinned at each other like silly school kids sharing a joke.

She had reached the end of the line and stood before Deepa.

‘Please to meet you, Commissioner,’ She said, suddenly more formal and less jokey.

‘Likewise I am sure, General.’ Deepa responded.

‘On behalf of the State Government of Brunswick I am proud to present you with the highest honour our state can bestow for outstanding service to the state: a golden Arya award

She pinned the scintillating gleaming blue and gold iridescent disc onto Deepa’s sari border where a row of medals awarded by the Hindustan Government already hung. And as she did so she whispered to her. ‘You did good girl, your example is a shining lamp that lights the way for all of us I reckon.’

I chuckled to myself under my breath and thought. Later I will have to get Natasha’s secretary to tell him that Deepa means “lamp”, or I wondered, did she actually know already?

Natasha turned to address the crowd again. She smiled and said.

‘There will be statements issued to the press shortly with full details of what information has been released so far, for the moment we can just answer a couple of questions. Maybe three at most.’

A voice rang out from the crowd. ‘Hobart Morning Star: General Maguire. Are you intending to return to Earth to gain possession of the alien space ships?’

Natasha smiled, ‘I cannot confirm or deny that at this point, no comment.’

Another voice called out, ‘Otway Express: Are you still hoping to meet the First Buddhas, Dr Chandra?’

I nodded, ‘That is the main reason I am going to Earth.’

A woman’s voice called out, ‘Namaste!: Commissioner Deepa, what is the best thing about Earth?’

Deepa smiled at the correspondent and replied, ‘The tea.’

Two hours later the press and the VIPs had transported down to the surface and the spaceship Monaro was travelling through hyperspace bound for Earth.

Again we were all gathered together as we had been on the dais at the meeting but with two differences. First, we were also joined by Emily Thompson who was acting as our chief science officer and second, I was out of that formal uniform again and back into a regular spacesuit.

The atmosphere at the table was redolent with the smell of fresh brewed coffee and I was nibbling on a chocolate chip cookie as I looked over the data on my personal organiser. As I watched data was being downloaded from the central data matrix showing projections on the energy involved in the hypothetical reconstruction of the solar system. I took a sip on my coffee and put it down as Natasha got up and walked over to the room's main view screen and downloaded a page of figures on to it.

'Friends, we are not sure what we are looking at here. If we ignore the possibility that the First Buddha technology is so out of our comprehension that we might as well call it magic then there are a number of possibilities.

She paused and highlighted a row of data in the spreadsheet.

'First, a number of research scientists are proposing that they are able to transfer matter and energy between alternate universes. The advantage of this theory is this would fit with the experiences reported by Chandra and the other members of his team. But it has the disadvantage of being beyond our present understanding of how to manipulate matter. Although,' She pointed to a particular set of equations. 'It might be understandable as an extension of some of Ramdev Ram's work on hyperspace and its relationship to normal space.'

She hit a key and the data displayed was replaced by a series of pie and bar charts.

'Second, I am proposing that the First Buddha technology relies on an ability to manipulate the probability of particles existing as matter or energy. The advantage of this theory is we can explain all of the events reported if this is the case, without resorting to any kind of extra dimensional factors. The disadvantage is we cannot explain either the source of the energy required to create some of the reported

phenomena nor yet can we explain how instruction sets are conveyed to the particle energy probability patterns to co-ordinate the transformations.’

Chopra broke in.

‘Dr Thompson, are you suggesting that all of what we experienced was as real as this room we are presently in?’

Natasha nodded, ‘yes it makes it simplest if we presume the simplest things. Occam’s razor. I am suggesting that basically it is reasonable to regard everything that happened to you as having been real. Real in the sense of having occurred to you in some way rather than just having been an illusion.’

‘Why not an illusion?’ I asked.

Natasha made a perceptible humph sound and replied. ‘Some of what you report could all be an illusion, in the sense of an altered perception.’

‘Such as in the portal?’

‘Such as that section of what occurred to you, yes. But, for us to have observed data unambiguously reporting the solar system going nova but now be receiving data that at the centre of where the nova was a new version of the solar system has formed. That can not be an illusion. Not unless of course, the entire universe is an illusion.’

Tara chipped in. ‘Although in that case why observe data like this at all?’

She superimposed another data set on the main viewscreen in which we could see a ring of matter expanding out into space, as if from a supernova, but at the centre instead of a pulsar a normal solar system.

‘This is the latest data from the newly replaced North Polar Observatory. You can see that it seems to show the results of what was a physical effect in the real universe.’

Natasha nodded enthusiastically and said emphatically.

‘Exactly, if the whole thing is an illusion why bother to manifest phenomena which are like this, no we seem to be observing the results of the ability to manipulate matter and energy in a previously unknown manner.’

Tara smiled back at her and said.

‘What I think we need is a third theory to add to the two theories you presented Dr Thompson, or can I call you Natasha?’

Natasha shrugged.

‘Natasha I think that the entity that called herself the programmer in some of the encounters reported is programming the universe in the sense that she is altering the parameters in the sense of the instructions being propagated to individual atoms of matter energy probability.’

‘Interesting proposal Senator Kern.’

‘Call me Tara please Natasha.’

‘Okay I like that proposal Tara with one proviso, we are not talking about atoms but something at a much finer level still. The interface between nothing and something so to speak, the ability to manipulate quantum probabilities and cause matter and energy to spontaneously appear in this space time continuum according to predefined patterns. But what I don’t understand is how the instruction sets manipulate the probabilities.’

I looked around at my partners from the mission and we all nodded.

Natasha noticed and said, ‘Chandra, you and Deepa and Chopra and Uravashi agree with that theory, why?’

I drew in a deep breath and said.

‘Natasha, Tara, sorry to say we have kept back certain information from you in our accounts of our experiences. We all agreed that initially it might be better not to report it until we were sure of the reality of what we experiencing on Brunswick. We now feel that you need to know about a further factor that effects your discussion of the way that the matter energy probability manifests.’

‘Chandra, what data did you withhold?’

I shrugged, ‘quite a lot to be honest, what actually happened in the habitat ring of the portal to begin with, we told you we just flew through. That was a half truth. Second, since that time we have been in constant contact with a type of non-human intelligence we have not previously mentioned to you at all.’

‘Are you in contact now?’ Natasha asked looking disconcerted by my revelation.

‘Yes,’ Deepa replied for me, ‘And please prepare yourself to meet our friends.’

So saying I heard a whisper in my mind, ‘Here we go then.’

I felt that burning sweet sensation that was Gopika separating and at the same time the whole room filled for a moment with a scintillating radiance centred on each of us before the light coalesced into the four Yakshis who were accompanying us.

They had chosen to manifest in their more space age versions of their appearance. Their heavy jewellery was showing its electronic equipment aspect as much as its aspect as its decorative aspect. Otherwise they were very much as always, stunning.

Natasha stared in incredulity, Tara giggled.

‘Hi there, what should we call you?’

Champa strode forward and stood beside Natasha in front of the main viewscreen.

‘My name is Champa and these are some of my sisters: Gopika, Radhika and Preeti, you can call us by our names please. We have no caste designations, we have no castes, but as a community we are known as Yakshis.’

She nudged Natasha with her elbow and said.

‘Do we seem real to you.’

‘Unreal.’ She replied.

‘Eh?’ Champa said in incredulity.

Natasha laughed, ‘Unreal in the sense of too real, it is a pleasure to meet you.’

She paused and smiling said, ‘I don’t know whether to begin by asking you how you manifested yourselves how come you look so lovely with so little effort.’

Radhika giggled, ‘Ah ha? You will have to watch yourself Champa with that one.’

Champa laughed, ‘Thanks for the compliment. I am going to call you Natasha, Natasha, one word you kept using in your theory really bugged me.’

‘What word?’

‘Manipulate, its a nasty term and I don’t like to think of manipulating anything.’

‘What word would you like to use?’

‘Communicate is the right term. You see you missed out one factor from your analysis. Sentience. You are insisting on regarding the matter energy probability as a purely physical process. That is where you are wrong.’

‘In what sense? Are you saying that matter is sentient?’

Champa smiled and played with the display keyboard for a moment then went ‘phooey’ and pointed at the viewscreen and it changed to display a triangular arrangement of circles. Each circle in three

colours phasing from gold to silver to translucent crystal like hints that seemed to reflect the room we were sitting in.

‘There are three aspects to phenomenal reality. I choose to call them existence, consciousness and bliss, you could also call them matter, energy and sentience. It depends on how you see them. Physical beings such as yourselves tend to see only the matter and energy and think that sentience exists as a by product of the first two. We Yakshis are basically sentience and see matter and energy as by products of sentience.

‘So you can create universes just like that?’ Natasha said in astonishment.

Champa giggled and wagged her finger at her.

‘Silly lass, we cannot do that kind of thing at all. We can make small local area changes in matter and energy around us. We cannot do things like make up whole planets and universes. That is not our area of expertise. That is the goddesses work.’

‘The entity that called herself the programmer?’ Tara asked.

Champa nodded, ‘Yes the great goddess is how we know her.’

A woman’s voice spoke from the back of the room.

‘I prefer to be known as Cindy at the moment please.’

We all swung around and stared at the figure of a woman sitting in a spare chair by the entrance to the meeting room. She stood up and strode forward and joined Natasha and Champa in front of the main viewscreen. She gestured at the three scintillating spheres and they appeared to transform so that they were floating in space and revolving around each other in a complicated dance.

‘That’s better, now Champa you see the fourth dimension is also being displayed better, time.’

She fingered her necklace and instantly the room disappeared and we were somehow no longer looking at the diagram but in it.

‘Let’s adjust the viewpoint as well to something less ridiculously one-pointed.’

Her voice seemed to emanate from everywhere, it seemed to be in immanent in all things, both the observer and the observed.

‘Champa’s understanding is limited friends, as is your own, and in fact as is mine.’

The spheres changed their dance and I realised that I was looking not at only three spheres but an infinite array of spheres stretching out in every direction.

‘I program the spheres. In the sense I can suggest to them ways in which they might like to dance to the tunes I compose. They manifest as matter, energy, sentience, not because I make them: but as an expression of their basic nature which is best spoken of in human language as empty clarity without grasping.’

She paused and in the silence left by the absence of the sounds of her words I sensed another presence. A male voice echoed in my thoughts and reverberated through my consciousness like a pulse that set the rhythm to which the spheres danced.

‘The goddess and I exist in space and time as the expression of the compassionate nature of consciousness itself. I create the time signature in which the rhythm pulses to which the goddess sets the harmonies of the spheres playing.’

The female and male voices merged and sang in harmony.

‘It is so simple why don’t people see the way?’

World spheres dance to the tune the goddesses play,

Universes exist in the rhythm the gods dance everyday.

In the dance the basic building blocks of the phenomenal universe evolve,

time, matter, energy, sentience: the elements interpenetrate and revolve.

But ask us not of the strings on which the melodies resound,

The basic substrate of reality on which the melody is bound.

We sing to you and say, you will find the answer, have no fear,

To know the truth, just ask those who we too honour and revere.’

As the melody faded the vision of the spheres faded and we found ourselves sitting again in the conference room.

Champa muttered, ‘Well said, well said, well said.’

Then Chopra broke the spell, ‘It seems to me we need a fourth theory, maybe the truth is beyond comprehension in discursive thought.’

He had hit the nail on the head again.

I blinked and looked around me, ‘friends there is much that it seems none of us understands, neither men, spirits, or gods, we must find those who even the gods revere and ask them I say.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ Natasha asked.

‘Why the First Buddhas of course,’ Champa replied, then added, ‘who else?’

‘Is she gone again?’ Chopra asked looking around the room carefully.

Gopika nodded her head and said slowly, ‘gone in the sense of not directly manifesting here, not gone in the sense that we are all her anyway.’

That was a bit of a conversation stopper.

Luckily Natasha then turned back to the screen which had returned to showing her original data again. She keyed in some more figures and then hummed and hawed for a moment before speaking.

‘Okay so now we have four theories on how to explain what we have now all experienced.’ She stopped speaking and turned to Champa.

‘I think though that I need to know a lot more about your powers in order to refine my models.’

She winked at Natasha and whispered, ‘Umm, I would enjoy showing you some of my powers but I think I know another of my sisters who would know better than me how to explain what we understand to you.’ She turned to the other Yakshis and said.

‘We need Menaka and Ritu here now as well to help. We must summon them across the light years.’

‘Oops...’ Gopika said, ‘that’s a tall order, we will all have to combine our efforts to do that.’ She smiled and the Yakshis all moved so that they were standing in a ring in the centre of the room. They started to dance round in a circle and their feet moved and their bodies swayed and they snapped their fingers and waved their arms above their heads. Gradually it became impossible to see the individual figures in the dance as they sped up speed. They started to scintillate with light and a golden radiance grew around them and for a moment they were invisible in a searing white glowing ball of light. Then the radiance cooled from white to blue and their individual limbs and figures, glistening and lithe became visible. Only now at the centre of the circle stood two figures, not Yakshi but human, and the circle itself had six Yakshis in not four.

They came to a halt and all flopped down on the floor like petals of a flower drooping in the heat. I rushed over and offered Gopika a glass of water. She drank it straight down and gestured around her. ‘We all

need water, and sugar syrup please mixed with milk.’ For a moment I didn’t know what to offer. Deepa did and she hurried over to the replicator and came back with a tray of glasses of water and cups of liquid.

‘Perfect,’ Champa said drowning two cups in two gulps.

‘Not bad tea I thought as well,’ Deepa laughed, ‘My favourite setting for Darjeeling, but with milk and sugar as you like it.’

Meanwhile David and Emily were sitting at the table and also drinking tea and staring around them wide eyed. Suddenly Emily spotted me and said.

‘Chandra! Where are we? We were on the Garuda a moment ago and now?’

‘You are on the Spaceship Monaro headed out from Brunswick to Earth and it seems that these two Yakshis, Menaka and Ritu, have just saved you around 22 months of travel in the twinkling of an eye.’

‘Oh yeah?’ David said and looked carefully at the Yakshis, ‘weren’t you the one who led me to the lift shaft out of the portal.’

Menaka bowed her head and said, ‘I did, I helped you get out of the portal and my friend Ritu slipped away with us in the probe and joined with you without you noticing.’

My ears pricked up, so the Yakshis could join with people without them even knowing? This was news to me, it certainly wasn’t the approach Gopika had taken with me. Deepa was also looking quizzically at Champa. ‘So you could have just merged with me? Then did we need to...’ She came to a sudden halt evidently realising she was about to say something which she didn’t want to say. Still Champa knew what she was talking about clearly as she went up to Deepa and putting one arm round her shoulders and cupping her other hand so it was between Deepa’s ear and her mouth whispered something in Deepa’s ear. I couldn’t hear what it was, but Deepa blushed.

Natasha coughed, ‘excuse me, but does transporting people instantly over several light years constitute what you Yakshis call “small local area changes in matter and energy around us”? If so then I question your use of the words “small” and “local”.’

Champa laughed, ‘on our own none of us could do that but if we combine our powers then we can do somewhat larger orders of magnitude effects.’

Menaka suddenly broke in, ‘These are scientists, yes? Goodie, which one knows maths best?’

Gopika pointed at Natasha. Menaka rushed over to her and said.

‘Pleased to meet you my name is Menaka, I love trying to explain how things are to entities new to Yakshi science. Emily understands a lot now, you should talk to her. Although she does not realise yet how much she understands. But now we are all face to face we can begin to cover some of the basic ground. You are familiar with partial differential equations? Of course, don’t say anything, what a silly question. Now you need to understand two more classes of equations.’

‘What are they?’ Natasha said eagerly. Menaka grabbed her and Emily by the hand and pulled them over to the coffee machine and I could hear her starting to say.

‘You can call them impartial differential equations which are easy and then there are the slightly more difficult to grasp impartial undifferentiated equations...’ The rest of their conversation was incomprehensible to me once she launched into a statement beginning ‘It is obvious that...’ It was evidently not going to be at all obvious to me.

David suddenly said to me, ‘Chandra where is Rom? Is he on this ship as well with you?’

I had a lot of explaining to do over the next hour or so before the ship emerged from hyperspace it seemed. Mind you I wondered too about Rom. What had happened to the Bijlirani after we left it orbiting the Earth in 2191? Was it still there? If so what had become of Constables Deepak and Saxena and its other crew?

Deepa had thought of another vital question as well it seems as later she drew me aside for a moment and said.

‘Chandra, I’m worried about something Cindy said. She spoke of “the program” running for five thousand years from 544 BCE. That would be to 4456 CE, but this is only 2645 CE. What do you think she wants us to do?’

I frowned, ‘That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question I reckon, and I think the only way we can find out is to find the First Buddhas and ask them.’

What it all came down to the end is what would we find on Earth this time? My suspicion was that it was what we would find in Bodh Gaya that would answer all our questions.

In the short term though it turned out I also had some other questions to answer as well. Natasha pulled me and Deepa over to one side and said.

‘Withholding information relevant to an enquiry, not good guys, not good. Why didn’t you let on about any of this on Brunswick? The guys at the station will be livid when they hear about this.’

Deepa handled this for me rather neatly I felt. She smiled at Natasha and said. ‘It is what a friend of mine calls “skillfull means” telling only what needs to be told at the right time, don’t think of it as withholding information, rather telling you what you need to know at any one time.’

‘Still not going to be happy about this at the base.’ Natasha growled.

Deepa fixed her gaze on her and said. ‘So wouldn’t it be skillfull not to tell them?’

Natasha smiled and said, ‘Sounds an interesting proposal, I will think about it.’

Deepa winked, ‘Take your time Natasha, don’t rush this one.’

‘My god!’ I said suddenly, ‘what about the other ships as well?’

Deepa grinned, ‘I have been wondering about them as well, I am looking forward to meeting Geshe-La and Dhammarakkhita again.’

I frowned, ‘And what of Vera and General Chang?’

Deepa frowned too, ‘That I am not looking forward to.’

Natasha looked quizzically at us and said. ‘Okay you guys what else have you omitted to tell us? I want the whole story.’ We told her the whole story to the best of our abilities. All three of us were frowning as we prepared to transition form hyperspace. What would this version of Bodh Gaya reveal to us?

Orbiting Earth: 21/10/2645 10:05

‘BSP spaceship Monaro calling the Hindustan Police spaceship Bijlirani, come in Bijlirani.’ I ended my hail and held my breath.

We waited in tense excitement to see if our hail would bring any response. There was no hope of scanning for the ship if she was still cloaked so we were depending on Rom still being functioning. After almost five hundred years I had my doubts and I was expecting our hail to go unanswered. I was wrong.

‘Bijlirani to Monaro, acting commander Rom speaking who I am speaking to? Dr Chandra? Is that you?’

‘Affirmative Rom,’ I said breathing a sigh of relief. ‘Status report.’

‘All ship systems at optimum status Dr Chandra. Is District Magistrate Deepa with you?’

‘I am Rom,’ Deepa replied, then she paused and asked the question which we hoped and prayed would have an affirmative answer.

‘Crew status Rom, are Constable Deepak and Saxena with you?’

‘Negative Deepa, Deepak and Saxena are not on the vessel. No human crew are on the ship.’

I felt a sense of deep sadness began to spread over my thoughts. How could they have survived for five centuries? I breathed deeply and resigned myself to the loss of my companions from the Bijlirani. It was a loss I would find it hard to live.

‘Deepa,’ Rom spoke again, ‘shall I communicate to Constable Deepak that you have arrived?’

‘What was that you said Rom?’ Deepa asked in a hushed voice.

‘Shall I send a message to Constable Deepak and the other crew that you have arrived or will you transport directly to the surface to meet them?’ Rom replied.

I gazed wide eyed at Deepa and tears came to my eyes.

‘Where are they Rom, please send their location so we can contact them.’

There was a crackle and then incredibly Deepak’s voice came online.

‘Deepa? Chandra? Its great to hear your voices, come on down we are in Pacchetti. You know the co-ordinates I think. Or if you prefer Rom is about to come down in the transport you could come with him.’

‘Negative Deepak, our ship has atmospheric flight capability we will come down and land at your location.’

‘Nice to hear that, got any drinks with you? We are getting bored of blossom wine and honey ale already and we will want to celebrate with you.’

‘I was going to ask you how you survived five centuries,’ I said then chuckled and added, ‘but I guess I know the answer now.’

I could hear Deepak laughing, ‘Survived five centuries? What are you on about you gallah? We have been here about two days since we came out of stasis, or whatever it was we were in.’

I breathed a sigh of relief and looked at Gopika who smiled and said.

‘Come on lets get down and meet them, even if blossom wine isn’t to their taste it is to mine and I want to see what the vintage is like this year.’

‘Chandra, you folks are never going to believe what its like down here its a mess. But a rather pleasant mess unlike the debris of a nuclear war. There is nobody down there and it looks as if everybody just left at some point. Watch out some of the automatic machinery seems to be still functioning.’

‘Okay Deepak see you shortly.’

As we prepared to descend from orbit to the surface Chopra pointed out a peculiar pattern of con trails in the atmosphere.

‘Seems that there are regular shuttle flights between some of the major cities of the world still operating.’ He looked up and added, ‘Which is odd as sensors indicate no life forms on any of them whatsoever.’

‘Uravashi, plot a course to avoid possible mid air collisions and take us in.’ Deepa said, Natasha nodded and Chopra initiated the descent. I studied the monitors fascinated by what I saw. Deepa had told me about Earth the previous time she had visited it in the present. A devastated wasteland in the grips of a nuclear winter. This appeared to be a kind of overgrown garden in the midst of a long hot summer. Global warming had obviously had some effects. Major effects, the littoral planes of most of the continents were all flooded. I called out to Uravashi.

‘Can you give me any figures on the sea level in comparison to previous levels in your last visit in 2191?’

Uravashi checked some read outs and called over, ‘about 75 feet above previous levels, that is concurrent with the partial melting of the Southern Ice cap which is visible in the polar scans.’

‘So no jaunts to places like London or New York,’ I thought to myself.

As we entered the atmosphere over central Asia I could have sworn I could actually see that the snow peaks of the Himalayan mountains glittering in the sun on the borders of the Tibetan plateau.

‘Atmospheric particulate matter levels are extraordinarily low,’ Natasha said looking up from the sensors she was monitoring. ‘Its as if there is nobody down there doing anything to create dust or pollution. No fires, no smoke.’

Chopra laughed, ‘no smoke without fire they do say, now can we add no fire without folk?’

Uravashi was obviously not planning on a the most rapid flight path to bring us down as we were now swooping down over the Punjab and the Northern Gangetic plains. The Ganges was vaster than I ever recalled, untamed, untrammelled it seems by human intervention its course wound in vast lazy loops over the landscape glittering in the sun like a gold and silver girdle around the waist of the beloved.

I could see vast tracts of forest and jungle spreading out from the Himalayan foot hills down into the plains and merging with grass lands and savannahs in some areas. As we sped over a mighty curve in the Ganges Radhika called out.

‘Hey its Kashi! You can just make out the spires and towers of the old city on the shore and there are the fallen remains of bridges across the river.’

Suddenly the ship swerved and accelerated upwards. Moments later I saw a jet liner zoom past us only a few hundred feet to our right.

‘Sorry about that folks I didn’t anticipate flights from Varanasi to Kathmandu would be still running.’ Chopra said hanging in his head in shame for a moment. Then he leant over to Uravashi and said, ‘That was fun any more flights to buzz?’

We turned from the Ganges course and sped across the upland plateau towards Magadh. Moments later we crossed the Son river glittering in the autumn sun light like a bow beneath the arrow of our speeding ship. Chopra started to reduce the airspeed and we slowed as we dipped down through some light cloud and then emerged suddenly into the sunlight over where the city of Gaya should have been. At least according to the data display superimposed onto my vision by my contacts. But there was only vast forest that stretched from the river to the hills, Gaya was no longer a city, like most of North India, it had been reclaimed by the climax vegetation forests and jungles of the equatorial regions.

‘Deepa, Natasha, we are reading life signs from three groups of humans on the surface. Natasha and a group about a mile North of the temple site.’ Chopra said. I nodded and added, ‘That is consistent with Pacchetti Port in the Vajrasana version of Bodh Gaya or Grand Central Station in the 2191 incarnation of the site.’

‘Take us down there as well please Chopra,’ Deepa said glancing at Natasha, she was obviously ill at ease with the idea of not being commander of the ship. Luckily Natasha seemed to be not bothered by her just taking over without any formal arrangements being made.

‘You mentioned two other groups of humans on the surface?’ I enquired.

‘Both groups are just a few hundred feet North of the temple site, one more to the East than the other.’

Deepa laughed, ‘Those will be the Tibetan and Singhalese monastery sites I imagine. Seems we can catch up with other old acquaintances.’

The ship slowed as it descended down towards an open area in between the sandy river course and the dense jungles that spread inshore of the river. We were aiming to land on what I reckoned from the pattern of just visible earthworks was probably the station forecourt of Grand Central station in 2191. We could see the transport from Bijlirani also sitting in the open area.

We touched down without incident and as I heard the systems whirr of the craft beginning to wind down I swung out of my seat and headed for the doorway. On my way I was joined by most of the staff of the flight deck.

Behind us we heard a cough, ‘Anybody waiting for me to say anything?’ Natasha said then laughed and said. ‘Okay I and Uravashi can take first watch on the ship and you lot handle this away mission for now.’ A broad grin broke on her face. ‘I have heard say a captain is the last person to leave a ship, I never thought it applied to circumstances like these as well.’ I stopped for a moment and agreed to come back and stand watch with Emily on the ship later in the day and then hurried out of the bridge.

Outside of the ship the air was heavy with the heat and humidity of the rains which were only just ending it seemed. The open area was almost in a square and I could make out the remains of the station buildings still entwined amongst the tree trunks to the East. To the West there was a small stream that represented the last traces of the highway that had been there last time. Amongst the palm and teak trees beyond the stream I could just make out the half tumbled spire of a temple decorated with ornate stone filigree work that somehow survived five centuries of jungle weather.

‘Hi guys! We are over here!’ Deepak cried out. I stared in astonishment, he was sitting on a tree stump under a great fig tree onto which somebody had nailed up a dilapidated sign saying “Gautam’s Restaurant: Have you tested?”

We hurried across the open ground and found Constables Deepak and Saxena sitting with a pair of Yakshis we had never met before.

‘May I introduce some of the locals to you?’ Deepak said and pointed to a buxom Yakshi sitting next to him, ‘This is Juhi,’ and then at a willowy figure sitting beside her with her arms draped around Saxena’s shoulders, ‘and this is Chameli’. Both of the Yakshis had flowers twined in their hair and their eyes twinkled brightly at us from under their dark eyelashes.

‘A pleasure to meet friends of our sisters,’ Juhi said and then offered a flagon of some sort of beverage to me and said. ‘Blossom wine?’

Gopika and Champa ran up and began to converse rapidly with Juhi and Chameli. They dropped into speaking the local Magadhi Hindi dialect and my standard spacer Hindi of the 27th century was quite unable to keep up with their conversation. I managed to make out simply that they were comparing long lists of relatives and where they were and what they were doing and discussing the state of the forest flowers and fruits in detail. I got lost when they started talking about who was coming to one of their sister’s marriages. I was about to say something to Deepak when suddenly I started and turned back to the Yakshis and said.

‘Did one of you say “marriage”?’

Juhi shrugged, ‘Yes its the marriage season coming up soon and we are trying to fix up Lata with a boy from a nice family.’

‘A boy?’ Deepa said in surprise. ‘There are Yakshi men?’

‘Yakshas please, have you not met our men folk yet?’ Juhi said.

‘No not at all, somehow I had come to the conclusion you are all women.’

Champa raised her eyebrows with a wide eyed expression of wonder.

‘What a strange idea! Most be because none of the fellows tend to wander far from home that you haven’t met any yet. But your in luck the forest here is full of all manner of folk.’ She looked happily at me and said.

‘We are home at last, we can feel it in our every pore, this is home and we are staying here.’ She took a sip of wine and beamed with joy.

‘Taste the wine of the forest Deepa, it makes you alive to drink it.’

Deepa sipped on her clay cup of wine and said.

‘Its nice I will give you that.’

Champa giggled at her, ‘Not just nice Deepa dear, without compare, this is the essential essence of the forest spirits.’

She gazed around at the trees and the butterflies and bees buzzing in the branches and blossoms on the tips of the trees and sighed.

‘Its been thousands of years since the forests of this land bloomed in such bounteous plenty.’ She suddenly hurled her cup up into the air and leapt up and ran from the clearing waving her arms in the air and singing.

‘Good riddance to humanity, the corruption and perversity, destroying our liberty!

‘Sylvan spirit possesses me, the heart wood of the Bodhi tree, see you later, byee!’

I stared in astonishment as suddenly all the Yakshis leapt to their feet and ran off into the forest after Champa. As she disappeared into the undergrowth I felt a sudden sense of a magic having gone from our midst.

‘I think the wine must have gone to their heads. Wonder when we will see them again?’ Chopra said gazing after where Radhika had disappeared into a tangle of white Jasmine blossoms cascading down an acacia tree covered in yellow blooms.

‘I wonder too,’ I said to myself under my breath.

I felt a sensation of something rustling against my leg. I looked down a shaggy black dog who had come up on me unawares was nuzzling my leg. I smiled and extended the back of my hand a bit towards him. He sniffed and then looked up at me and sat back on his haunches and sat as if waiting for something.

I felt in my bag for a packet of biscuits and offered him one which he snapped up in mid air as I dropped it in front of him. I fed him nine biscuits and then he stopped asking for more and got up and barked while pointing his nose in the direction of the location of the New Myanmar monastery of the 22nd century. I am not thick, I can take a hint even when it comes from a dog.

I said to Deepa, ‘I get the feeling we should follow this dog.’

She smiled and said, ‘Um, yes dogs seem to have been good friends to us on this journey lets see what he wants to show us.’

Chopra laughed, ‘probably his feeding bowl I expect.’

As we walked over and forded the little stream I wondered about that. Especially if there were no people left who could be feeding a dog in the ruins of the New Myanmar monastery?

The gateway had long since crumbled into a heap of bricks and creepers covered the mound that must have represented the main accommodation block. I am not sure why but it seemed the great skyscrapers of the 22nd century had disappeared totally. I suspected their metal structures and, probably substandard, building materials had rotted away much quicker than the bricks and mortar of the 20th century structures. As we entered the glade that lay at the heart of the monastery complex we passed through a dense bamboo thicket and then stopped in wonder at what we saw.

In the midst of the thicket in the middle of a white marble platform surrounded by a jade railing was a tiny and perfectly harmonious rock garden.

I and Deepa dropped to the ground and drew our weapons. This looked too much like one of Maya’s weird Chinese fantasies based on Vera’s memories for our liking. I gazed around in trepidation expecting something dreadful to entrap me again at any instant. Then I noticed something that changed everything.

‘What?’ I said and stood straight up and grabbed Deepa by the arm and pulled her up as well and propelled her towards the structure.

‘What “What” Chandra?’ Deepa said, ‘isn’t this a work of Maya?’

I shook my head, ‘no its a work of Vera look Maya would never have installed that aspect of Vera in one of her creations, its far too compassionate.’

I pointed to the outer ring of the platform. Inset in it at regular intervals were hatches which were at the right height for a dog to put their nose in and in each one their was a feeding bowl. Above the bowls were signs saying, ‘These food Replicators a gift by Donald and Vera Chang to the dogs of the Burmese Vihar so that they might not suffer after the demise of the children of the autumn moon.’ The message was kind of clear in meaning, although I was not sure about who the children of the autumn moon were it mentioned.

Also clear was the fact that standing in the centre of the rock garden was a standing stone about six foot high. It was square in profile and shaped like an Egyptian stele with a pyramid on its peak. I walked around it, at first disappointed. The first side I saw had Chinese characters on it, which I can't read, the second was written in Sanskrit, which was better, although slow going, the third in Pali and the fourth came up trumps, it was written in English. At first I couldn't believe the message, it said.

'Dear Chandra Deepa glad you are reading this as it means the Earth has been restored. We will not be joining you on the rest of your journey as we now have nowhere to go. We have composed this poem on your quest.

Seeking sundered shards to be reunited,
Diving deep in frogs worlds to be delighted.
Autumn Moon's sons and daughters,
Seek secrets in precious vessel's waters.

Wishing well for the quest to begin - Vera and Donald Ching.'

I read the message through again and again trying to make sense of it. Deepa also stared long and hard at it. 'What do you think the poem means?' I asked Deepa.

She squinted as if trying to get something in focus and said. 'I almost feel I understand it, but the meaning alludes me to be honest. Do you make anything of it?'

I scratched my chin and had to admit, 'Not a lot to be honest. But the meaning of the prose section is fairly clear. The first part is self explanatory, we are only here because the scheme the Yakshis suggested worked, that is obvious. They are not going to be taking part in the journey any longer and they bid us farewell. But as for the poem it has me foxed. Nice though they wish us well at the end of the message.'

Deepa said, 'Lets see if the meaning become clearer as things unfold.'

As we left the site and wandered back to the landing site Chopra said, 'Odd that their name was misspelled wasn't it? Can't get a good craftsman nowadays.'

I laughed and didn't think anything of it for a while.

Back at the landing site we dropped into a maelstrom of activity. A land vehicle had appeared which from the mud on its wheels had

driven along the stream to get there. In it were seated a number of ochre robed Singhalese monks and standing by the side of the vehicle was the figure of Dhammarakkhita who was talking to Natasha.

‘Shocking the state the temple is in, we are appalled, the neglect is frightful.’

Natasha said in bewilderment, ‘Perhaps that’s because the area appears to have been uninhabited for centuries.’

‘That’s no excuse as far as I am concerned.’ Dhammarakkhita replied and waved around him at the forest glade.

‘Think of the amount of funds I am going to have to raise to get all of this cleared up to interplanetary pilgrimage place standards. No Natasha we must immediately form an ad hoc managing committee to oversee the restoration of the temple.’

‘Immediately?’ Natasha said and then said quietly, ‘Its been five centuries or so what is a few months or so now before something is done?’

Dhammarakkhita stared in horror at her, ‘Young woman, have you seen the state of the temple? It is of the greatest moment to act now or there will be nothing left to restore. It would take but a single storm to dislodge sufficient bricks and cause the whole thing to fall like a pack of cards.’

‘So your point?’ Natasha said.

‘You must all drop whatever you are doing and come and help us shore up the temple forthwith, all of you, please?’ I think it was the last change in tone that showed the sincerity that lay beneath the bluster. Dhammarakkhita was genuinely concerned by the state of the temple. He turned around as if looking for support and saw me and said.

‘Ah Chandra you would appreciate the need to act to conserve archaeological remains of this importance.’

I nodded, ‘Actually I would and I am also most concerned about the state of the temple it needs restoring every few hundred years or it will turn into a pile of bricks.’

‘Exactly!’ Cried out Dhammarakkhita, ‘That is what I have been trying to get this young girl to understand.’ General Natasha Maguire frowned at being described in these terms. Luckily I knew a way to defuse the situation.

‘Stasis fields. We have a supply on the ship, we could erect them around the temple structure and stabilise it while we do surveys to determine what needs to be done.’

Dhammarakkhita’s eyes lit up and he said, ‘how can you get them to the temple?’

I shrugged, ‘We could off load them from the Monaro onto the Bijlirani’s transport and then land it in the temple compound.’

His face was suddenly animated by a broad grin and he leapt into his vehicle and cried out, ‘Excellent, I will meet you there in five minutes.’

‘Five minutes?’ I cried out as his vehicle disappeared in a spray of mud as it hurtled up the creek mangling flowers and creepers in its path and squashing orchids and tiny blooms. Frogs jumped in confusion left right and centre from behind its path.

Fifteen minutes later I lifted off in the shuttle and flew low over the dense forest canopy South. The scene was altered out of all recognition from any previous version of Bodh Gaya I had seen. The jungle had reclaimed the land and cloaked it in dense foliage that was alive with life. As I passed a palm grove that marked I thought perhaps the site of the old Hindu monastery a troop of monkeys was startled by the shuttle and fled shrieking through the tree tops. Up ahead there were the ruined hulks of the skyscrapers that had surrounded the central plaza at the height of the human habitation of Bodh Gaya. They stood like gaunt standing stones surrounding the temple compound. I navigated the shuttle between two towers that still stood taller than the others, like a desolate gateway to a lost city. One I recognised as the remains of the management committee building, the other I could not recognise as corresponding to anything in my memories. Then I realised that it must have stood on the site of the Shiva hotel, the last and greatest Shiva hotel of Bodh Gaya. Now a haunt for flocks of rosellas and parrots that flew up in a great profusion as I passed.

The temple itself was little more than a remnant of its former glory. The spire still stood but was now a shapeless stack of masonry that looked more like a brick kiln chimney than a temple. Somehow impossibly at its top the great circular form of the circular capping stone, the kalasha, still teetered. Looking at it I could only agree with Dhammarakkhita that if we didn’t do something straightaway the

whole thing would probably collapse any minute. I looked for somewhere to land the shuttle and Chopra said to me.

‘Put her down to the West of the temple near the old temple compound entry gate on the mound where the Tara temple stood. That still looks fairly open and stable.’

I did as he suggested and moments later we were situated on the slight hillock that marked the Tara temple site. We got out of the shuttle and gazed around us in amazement. The river had evidently flooded at some time in the not too distant past and flown into the compound bringing its sandbars into the temple grounds. Here and there we could still make out the remains of structures amidst the trees and bushes growing on the sand banks. More so to the East of the compound where the sand had not covered much of the ground, less so around us on the West and South side of the compound.

Dhammarakkhita’s vehicle was parked under the edge of a line of trees that lined the North of the compound. He hurried over with his followers and together we all unloaded the stasis field generators from the shuttle. They were heavy brutes to manhandle even on anti-gravity sleds their great mass still made them hard to control as they still retained all their momentum when they moved despite being weightless.

‘Where should we set them up?’ Chopra asked.

‘What about at the four corners of the temple?’ I suggested. After some discussion we moved four of the stasis fields into a square around the main temple. As we moved the last into position I stepped back and wondered what they reminded me of.

‘Do these remind you of something Chopra?’ I said pointing at the generators.

‘Stasis generators?’ Chopra said, ‘Big pointed stack type things several meters high, ugly brutes with disperser arrays on the top and heat sinks running down the sides. That sort of thing do you mean?’

I shook my head and took another few steps back and looked again to where I could see three of them clearly at the corners of the temple. Then I chuckled.

‘Chopra they look like weird versions of the old corner temples of the main shrine that’s what it is.’ He stood beside me for a moment and then agreed.

‘Reckon you are right Chandra, okay should we activate them?’

I nodded and we walked clockwise round the temple towards where the Bodhi tree grew and where Dhammarakkhita and his men were standing after positioning the other stasis field generators.

‘Our two generators are in place now,’ I told him.

He smiled and said. ‘My men have put the other two in place as well, are we ready to set up the field?’ I replied by tapping the remote control in my hand and with a faintly perceptible whirr a force field was created surrounding the temple. We adjusted the parameters on the field so that it settled into the form of a dome that enclosed the structure but did not touch it and looked at it glistening in the afternoon sun.

‘It looks rather like a beacon now,’ Chopra said, ‘not much like a temple anymore.’

‘A beacon to attract the future Buddha,’ I said, and Dhammarakkhita said smiling.

‘How appropriate, well at least we have begun again and once more a Singhalese monastic presence graces the temple of Bodh Gaya.’

He stepped forward and tried to walk towards the Bodhi tree.

‘Watch out,’ I cried but too late, he walked straight into the force field. There was a crash and a shower of sparks as he knocked into it and his progress was stopped. He turned around and said in perplexity

‘We can’t go in?’

I shook my head, ‘Its a stasis field Dhammarakkhita, nothing can get in, inside the field time is suspended, don’t you know how stasis fields work?’

He grinned and replied, ‘I haven’t the foggiest idea about them, I just know that my ancestors travelled in bio-stasis fields to Peredeniya Prime, I’ve never seen one before.’

‘But this isn’t a bio-stasis field Dhammarakkhita. Its a singularity tether field. Once operational the area inside is isolated from time. Normally we use such fields to tether a singularity in a space ship drive so that matter doesn’t fall into the singularity, only the energy emitted by the singularity can escape from the field. Only in this case there is no singularity inside and so its just a bubble of timeless space so to speak.’

He ran his hand over its invisible surface and added. ‘I’ve never seen timeless space before, let alone touched something in which no time

exists.’ He frowned. ‘So we can’t get inside to worship at the Bodhi tree?’

I shook my head, ‘not as long as we exist in time. Unless of course you turn it off. but we can scan through it and see what state the spire is in and work out what we need to do to stabilise the structure.’

‘Good, will you prepare a report for the committee?’

‘Why yes, I suppose we could.’

‘Excellent we will have our first meeting at twenty hundred hours in the New Singhalese Great Monastery.’ He waved in the direction of the jungle and added.

‘That’s in my ship actually as the monastery needs considerable refurbishment.’

‘Okay we will meet you then.’

He started to move off followed by his assistants and then turned around and said.

‘Thank you Chandra and Chopra, I think I am going to enjoy having you working on the Temple Management Committee Team.’

I wasn’t sure how we had all been co-opted onto the committee without even being asked, but for the moment I decided to accept my new role with equanimity.

Rather than take the shuttle back to the Monaro I suggested to Chopra we walk back as it was only a ten minute walk. He agreed and we set off to follow the tracks left by Dhammarakkhita’s vehicle through the jungle.

‘When do you think the sun sets round here Chandra?’ Chopra asked as we walked under the gloomy canopy of the trees.

‘Not sure, its October so I reckon about seven o’clock.’

‘That’s okay then its only six o’clock,’ Chopra replied.

But after a while I realised we had not counted on the jungle’s deep shade and by the time we passed the ruined entrance to the Hindu monastery the darkness was growing. As we approached a great fig tree we discovered there was something else which we should have thought of.

‘Shush,’ Chopra whispered to me grabbing my hand and making me stop my forward progress. He pointed ahead of us to the remains of a platform under the tree. Sitting on it, with its eyes glittering in the fading light, was a great tawny striped tiger which was looking at us

with amused indulgence. Almost as if it was wondering who had the temerity to invade its territory.

‘What do we do now?’ I whispered to Chopra.

‘Go back might be the best idea,’ Chopra said quietly and we began to retrace our steps, walking backwards. I think the tiger was probably not very interested in us as it swiped its tail from side to side and then proceeded to ignore us. A few minutes seemed like an eternity beating a retreat from that encounter. I glanced in the direction of the path to the river through the monastery and said to Chopra.

‘Shall we risk taking the path to the river and then heading back in the open to the Monaro?’ Chopra didn’t reply but stared into the dark of the jungle and shook his head. ‘No Chandra lets head back to the shuttle, its probably simplest.’

It turned out to even have its complications. As we approached the temple compound we heard a crashing in the undergrowth to the river side of the area. We stopped still for a moment trying to work what the sounds were. Moments later with a kind of rending roar we heard a tree falling in the forest and sounds like branches being torn to pieces. We skirted that area and headed back round to the shuttle which we hurriedly entered and then began activating its drive systems.

‘Chandra,’ Chopra said pointing at the monitor, ‘looked what we just avoided meeting.’ I looked at the monitor and gasped. A herd of elephants had emerged from the jungle by the river and were involved in stripping the foliage of leaves, by tearing branches from the trees. The largest bull elephant was also leaning up against a small fig tree, to begin with I thought it was scratching its back. Then with a great crackling and wrenching sound the tree started to fall over. I realised it had been pushed over so that its tender topmost foliage could be a feast for the elephants.

‘Lets get out of here Chandra,’ Chopra said as he engaged the drive, ‘before those elephants try to topple the shuttle and eat our fresh buds.’

We lifted off and headed back to the main ship. Under me I now saw the jungle not through the lens of oriental romanticism but as a place which despite its wild beauty was as dangerous as the urban jungle of the 22nd century.

I opened up a comm channel to the Monaro.

‘You are never going to believe what we have just seen,’ I said.

‘What?’ Came Uravashi’s reply.

‘First we had a close encounter with a tiger and then we just saw a herd of elephants. Its dangerous in this forest of Bodh Gaya.’

Natasha laughed, ‘We have had a few visitors here as well.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A group of rhinos ploughed through here around dusk and totally wrecked the equipment we left in the clearing. We tried to raise you to warn you but your suit comm links appear to be malfunctioning. I want to run diagnostics on them when you get back.’

‘Okay Natasha.’ I said looking forward to a shower and a change before the committee meeting.

‘Oh yes Chandra you are on duty from twenty hundred hours, okay?’

‘I am also invited to a Temple Management Committee meeting at the Singhalese ship, what should I do?’

‘I’ll leave it up to you Chandra, pick the less boring option.’

Two hours later I was watching the monitors on the bridge of the ship and twiddling my fingers. Definitely less boring. I sent a memo with my apologies to the committee meeting.

In my mind I ran round the peculiar poem Vera and Donald had left for us.

Seeking sundered shards to be reunited,

Diving deep in frogs worlds to be delighted.

Autumn Moon’s sons and daughters,

Seek secrets in precious vessel’s waters.

What did it mean? I couldn’t decide but I began to get a sense it was a kind of riddle and if I could crack the code in it then it would help us figure out what to do next. I contacted Deepa, who had taken the shuttle and returned to Bijlirani, and chatted with her. I told her about our encounters with the wild life and setting up the stasis field around the temple.

She told me she had been talking with Rom about what he had observed. It seemed that he had been fully active for the last five centuries. It was only the living crew members who reappeared like us a few days ago. To keep himself busy he had monitored events on Earth and had seen what had happened on Earth from orbit.

‘Chandra, he told me about the Autumn moon’s sons and daughters. It seems he monitored communications on the surface. After we left

there was some kind of universal communist revolution on Earth, which was called The Autumn Moon revolution, and that's who the children of the Autumn moon were, the people who lived after that revolution.'

'What happened to them all then?'

'Rom is not sure, they seem to have not carried on using telecommunications after a while. Within a century or so he says all telecommunications activity ceased on Earth.'

'So where are all of them now?'

'He is not sure, there were media reports in the years after the revolution which spoke of problems with the children of the revolution showing no interest in worldly life. He thinks that basically they all just left and went in the forest. But he is not sure what happened to them there. The media stopped reporting about them after a while and focused only on the heroic achievements of the party and the economic successes of the Earth.'

I scratched my chin and looked out at the dark jungle and said. 'So somewhere out in this jungle there may be communities of people living totally divorced from technology?'

'No Chandra, Rom could also scan for life signs. There is nobody there. There has been nobody for hundreds of years. His last sighting of a life sign was in the UK about a hundred and twelve years after the revolution. Since then there has not been a living soul on the planet.'

'Human soul,' I corrected her staring at a pair of green feline eyes which were staring back at me from the darkness of the jungle in the monitor. I winked and the eyes were gone. But I knew that the forest was far from a virgin Eden. Rather it was more like the manifestation of the savage unconsciousness of the planet which was coming out again now that it no longer had to cower from man and his works.

At the end of the watch I retired to my quarters and drifted into fitful dreams. I dreamt of primeval jungles full of ferocious animals that dwelt under trees and by water holes and wells amidst the ruins of man's last works. The last image I remember dreaming of was of frogs in a well staring up at the moon and croaking at the night sky.

In the morning I consulted with Natasha and arranged with her to go to the temple site and begin the survey work we would need to do. I certainly wasn't keen to stroll in the jungle any longer and I waited for

Deepa, and Uravashi to come down again before we all went together in the shuttle to the temple. Tara and Emily also came along and left Constables Deepak and Saxena on watch in the Monaro.

‘I don’t want to seem paranoid,’ I said before we set out, ‘But we should all carry weapons today, I don’t want to be unprotected if I have another encounter with a tiger.’

Deepa laughed and chuckled over a deflector field belt. ‘I agree Chandra but this is an alternative, we will all wear deflector field belts from now on.’

I nodded but checked my weapon systems as well, and made sure everybody else did as well before we set off.

‘Chandra,’ Natasha said, ‘we have checked out the suit comm link diagnostics and we think we have identified the problem. They don’t work in close proximity to the tether field you have set up around the temple. Its field scatters comm beams in its vicinity.’

‘What radius is affected?’

‘About a hundred yards or so beyond the field.’

‘In other words just the area around the temple, that is not so bad we can live with that.’ I said but felt unhappy at this development. In truth we never normally set up such fields in areas we worked in. I preferred to keep several kilometres of ship hull between me and the drive arrays on a tethered singularity drive like that on a black hole drive ship like the Garuda. In fact I realised nobody normally worked in close proximity to such a field. We were only carrying a spare set of field generators as a back up in the unlikely event us meeting a ship with a malfunctioning black hole drive and needing our assistance.

We didn’t bother with a fancy flight path to the temple today and just boosted up vertically and descended again in a parabolic trajectory. One advantage of this was that at our maximum elevation I got a good view of the surrounding area.

I could clearly see the Singhalese and Tibetan ships standing in the jungle to the north of the dome of the temple. I was amazed at how broad the river was, I think the verdant jungles kept it full of water in a way that the arid fields of the reign of man in these parts had not. Beyond the jungle I could barely make out the Dungeshwari hills at all.

‘Uravashi what has happened to the hills to the East? They don’t seem to be very high any more.’

Uravashi checked a number of sensors and then reported.

‘Chandra they seem to have largely eroded away now, I guess the long period of being totally denuded of vegetation during the twentieth to twenty second centuries took their toll of them. They seem to be hardly more than heaps of rubble now.’

Deepa was listening and added, ‘I doubt we could find any entrances to the cave complexes from the hills any longer. We are going to have to find another way to get down to the caverns.’

Natasha shook her head, ‘and the temples out for a start as its in a stasis field we cannot see if there is an entrance from it.’

‘Dhammarakkhita would have a fit anyway if we tried to interfere with the temple.’

I said and then we were descending low over the temple site and coming into land.

We disembarked from the shuttle and made our way over to the temple site. We stopped outside the dome when we saw Dhammarakkhita coming over with two companions, who were in red rather than ochre robes.

‘Deepa what a pleasure to meet again,’ Geshe-La said shaking her hand. Then he added, ‘You remember Dorje of course?’

‘How could I forget?’ Said Deepa, ‘So you are a monk Dorje?’

Dorje chuckled, ‘No actually, I am not, but in the Tibetan tradition Rimpoche’s such as myself can wear robes even if we are not monks.’ He paused, ‘there are actually subtle differences you see.’

While he explained the differences I began to wander around the site and map out onto my plotter the location of remains which were still standing around the temple. To be honest there was not a lot. The best preserved area was in the South West corner of the compound. But disappointingly there was nothing very historic seeming in the area. There was a kind of shed which had apparently been used to store maintenance equipment in. Probably mid-twentieth century I suspected and nearby it a number of flat platforms and a well. I was surveying the platforms and making measurements of their dimensions when Chopra strolled over. For a few minutes he just sat on the rim of the well watching me and then irritated I said to him.

‘Chopra be a good fellow and lend me a hand rather than just standing by the well and looking at me working.’

He raised his eyebrows and said 'Okay' in a slightly peeved voice while fishing around in his pocket for something then as he got up he picked a coin out of his pocket and saying 'Ah that's good' tossed it down the well. I heard it splash in the water.

'Now I'm ready,' he said, 'I've wished for good luck in our endeavours today.'

I gazed at him standing by the well having just thrown a coin down into it and saw the light.

'Wishing well for the quest to begin -'

'Eh Chandra, what did you say?' Chopra said strolling over to me.

I rushed past him and looked down the well. It looked deep. It looked like it could be a wishing well.

'Call the others!' I shouted. We stood and hollered out loudly to attract attention.

'Come on over here!' I shouted out and waved my hands in the air wildly.

Deepa and the others came hurrying over.

'What's up Chandra?' Natasha said looking around in confusion as if trying to see what was making me so excited.

'Wishing well for the quest to begin - it was in the riddle that Vera and Donald left for us at the Burmese Vihar. This is the wishing well they meant I reckon.'

Natasha peered into the well and said.

'What are you suggesting?'

Deepa broke in, 'I think we have been told how to get access to underneath the temple. We need to go down this well.'

Natasha pointed her sensor pad down the well and looked at the read out.

'Its about three yards down to the water level and then beyond that about another four yards to the bottom of the well.' She looked up and said, 'Whose game to go down and have a look.'

'I'll go first,' Deepa said, 'I like swimming.'

I glanced down the well and said, 'probably not a lot of swimming in a well Deepa, plus how are you going to get down, or for that matter up again?'

Tara laughed and said. 'I have my climbing gear in the shuttle, I was hoping we might get a chance to do more climbing again and so I

came prepared. So I think we are set.’ She headed off round the temple to the shuttle and while we were staring down the well.

‘So why should we start here Chandra?’ Chopra asked. I repeated the riddle.

‘Seeking sundered shards to be reunited,
Diving deep in frogs worlds to be delighted.

Autumn Moon’s sons and daughters,
Seek secrets in precious vessel’s waters.

Wishing well for the quest to begin - Vera and Donald Ching.’

‘I thought they were just wishing us well on our quest until you dropped the coin down the well Chopra, then I realised they were actually saying “to begin the quest” at the “wishing well”. What’s more it is a perfect way to get down below the temple. As obvious as the nose on your face.’

‘Diving deep in frogs worlds to be delighted.’ Deepa said, ‘that is also a reference to a well if I am not mistaken, there is an old saying that frogs which live in a well think its the whole world, so its saying we have to dive deep into the well and then... then we will be delighted I suppose.’ She looked over the rim of the well again and said.

‘I always just thought it was a later addition to the temple complex, but perhaps its an original access point to the underground caverns which was later used as a well.’

Natasha shook her head, ‘No Deepa your reports said the caverns weren’t waterlogged, yet this well has water in it. I reckon it leads somewhere else.’

‘Unless it comes up into the air again, like a quick dive down and then up again onto dry land. These deflector shields hold about two minutes of air so I can swim around and see if there are any side tunnels from the well shaft.’

‘Here are the ropes guys, lets get roped up and go down.’ Tara said as she came back. She slung down the ropes on the ground and handed us all climbing harnesses.

‘Whoa there guys,’ Natasha said shaking her head, ‘let’s take this step by step. First just Deepa goes down to see if there is anything in the well. Not much point in us all climbing down a well if it leads nowhere.’

So Deepa put on a climbing harness and we fixed the rope to it and she climbed up on the rim of the well and said, 'Wish me luck guys.' I crossed my fingers.

In the Wishing Well: 23/10/2645 10:38

As I let the rope out and manoeuvred my way down I examined the well wall. To begin with for about the first three feet it was covered in smooth plaster. Then the plaster became patchy and revealed courses of bricks lining the wall. Initially they were small bricks each of which were about three inches deep: modern bricks. Then they changed about six feet down to broader bricks about eighteen inches wide and only about an inch and a half thick: medieval bricks. Gradually they changed from being fairly clean to being covered in green lichen and moss. Here and there tiny ferns were growing where the mortar between the courses needed pointing. Just above the water level I sensed a subtle change in the appearance, I reached out and ran my hands over the surface of the well wall: I felt smooth masonry blocks under my finger tips. I shined my flashlight on them and scratched their surface with my finger nails and looked closely, they were ochre sandstone: the stone of the Ashokan period railings of the temple. I called up to Chandra.

'I am down about at the level of the water and the sides of the well are made of what looks like the same stone as the Ashokan railings.'

'Not a modern well at all then,' Chandra said, then with a growing sense of excitement added. 'So in all probability the well has been here since before even the temple was built when the only thing here was the Bodhi tree and a stone railing.'

I activated my deflector shield, so I and my clothes would keep dry, and slowly let myself down into the water. Even through the field I could sense the water was icy cold. I ducked down below the water level and felt myself immersed in silence and as the water rose above my head, a deep sense of isolation settled over me.

The rope was now like a lifeline linking me to the world above. I shone the flashlight I was wearing on my forehead onto the well wall again and looked carefully at it as I slowly descended for a minute or two. It was smooth and now seemed to have no visible breaks in the courses of masonry in it. I ran my fingers over its surface again and grinned. If there were any joins between the blocks lining the well

wall they were now imperceptible, or it was a single smooth surface like a first Buddha construction. I reckoned I knew a way to find out as well. I pulled out a claw hammer from my belt and tried to scratch at the surface. I couldn't gain the slightest grip on it. I smiled and rapidly pulled myself up the rope and broke the surface as the air in my lungs was becoming stale. I breathed in a breath of fresh air and looked up. A circle of heads were hanging over the well rim silhouetted against the sky.

'Chandra!' I called out, 'It looks like you were right about six feet under the surface it changes from masonry to what looks just like First Buddha polished rock tunnel wall. I get the feeling this is an original entry shaft into the underground caverns under this place.'

'Any actual sign of an entrance though?' Natasha asked.

'I didn't see any in the first six feet or so under the water. How much further can I go down do you reckon?'

'Its about twenty four feet from the water level to the base according to my sensors. Do you reckon you can go that deep?'

I took that as an affront to my honour and replied, 'Of course!'

In fact I was not at all sure how to check out the rest of the well. Then I resigned myself to diving deep to begin with and slowly letting myself rise up again as the only approach that might work. Although I was reluctant to let go of my lifeline to the surface. But, I wasn't going to let Natasha impugn my tenacity, I would loose face in front of the others, which for a leader is not wise.

I took a deep breath and turned over in the water and swam head down as fast as I could kicking out with my legs hard as I went. In a few moments I reached the bottom. Rough stones embedded in silt covered the well base, fragments of statues and decorated pillars: probably priceless but not very interesting to me just now. I turned and inspected the walls. Staring straight at me was a low arch that led off into a tunnel running horizontally at right angles to the well shaft. I flipped over again and kicked out and headed into the tunnel. After an instant it changed to a vertical shaft and I swum up it for a moment and suddenly as I kicked out found myself with my head above water. I breathed deeply. The air smelt musty but not too bad, like a room in a house that has not been dusted for a season, not dank and mouldy like a drain. I looked around and saw I was in a kind of round chamber with a domed roof. It was similar to the lift access entry

point that we had been to in the Dungeshwari hills. So similar in fact that if I hadn't just swum up into it I would have sworn it was the very same place.

'Yes!' I said to myself, my voice echoing around the blank stone walls of the chamber, 'yes, yes, yes...yes...' until it merged into the silence. I had seen what I needed to see. I took a deep breath and dived down and in an instant it seemed was back in the well and kicking up towards the surface. It was so simple.

'Its a doddle guys!' I called up to the watchers at the well mouth, 'there is a fine neatly constructed tunnel which leads from the well up into a chamber like one of those ones from which you get access to lifts from.'

'Hold on a moment Deepa we are going to pull you up, Dhammarakkhita has had an idea.'

I was pulled up the well and back onto the surface. I sat for a moment on the well rim and stared down at the water in the well smiling and thought to myself.

'This is more like it.'

For an instant the sun glittered on the water and I was blinded by a brilliant flash of light. Then I turned and stared in astonishment at what I saw.

Dhammarakkhita had had more than an idea. He had gone and got a truck. It was a kind of flat bed utility vehicle and on its back I could see his idea. A blooming great pump set with long hoses and pipes attached to it.

I saw the sense in his idea at once, it was worth a try. A few minutes later the calm and quiet of the temple courtyard was broken by the sound of the motor of the pump set working at full throttle. An outlet pipe was linked up that ran over the bank that surrounded the temple courtyard and in a short while the water was being sucked from the well.

'What on earth are you doing with a pump set Dhammarakkhita?' I asked in astonishment.

'Deepa, I once read that the 21st century Temple had a giant water spout fountain installed in the Lotus pond behind the temple and I was hoping to install something similar in the temple I was hoping to reconstruct on Earth before its destruction when I first met you. So I

had the equipment which might be needful in storage on our ship. Turns out that I was right to keep it available eh?’

I shook my head in amazement, I thought to myself, ‘why on earth would anybody want to put a giant fountain in the grounds of the Mahabodhi temple?’

Luckily his strange idea was paying off. After about ten minutes the water level in the well dropped rapidly. It was filling much slower from its sources than the powerful pump was emptying it.

Twenty minutes later the well was dry and we lowered rope ladders into it. Half an hour later we were all climbing down the well together, all ten of us. I looked at my watch, it was noon as we all traipsed along the side shaft and climbed up a ladder we had brought with us into the domed chamber at the end of the tunnel.

I climbed out onto the circular platform surrounding the entrance to the chamber and looked around. It was about thirty feet or so in diameter and it was quite featureless apart from two doorways each of which must have been at least twelve feet wide. Broad enough for at least four people to walk side by side down.

As I was the last to emerge from the tunnel when I arrived in the chamber there were now ten of us standing there. Myself, Chandra, Tara, Natasha, Uravashi, Chopra, Emily, Dhammarakkhita, Dorje and Geshe-La. We were all looking alternately at the two possible exits and each other apart from Chandra and Natasha. Chandra was carefully walking round the walls of the chamber and shining his light on them and running his hands over them. Whilst Natasha was shining her light down one and then the other. She said.

‘Both appear to be featureless tunnels one slopes down at about thirty degrees and the other slopes up very slightly, with not much else to help decide between them.’

‘Which way should we go?’ Chopra said looking at the two possible exits from the chamber. Chandra was just finishing his survey of the walls and he shrugged his shoulders as he finished and said.

‘I can’t see any clues from the chamber as to which to take, but I’m always for trying the left tunnel, I’ve found that going clockwise, starting to the left, works well in First Buddha structures.’

Natasha had been inputting figures on her data pad and she shook her head and said.

‘Chandra, I think this time we should try the right hand tunnel. I have plotted our position and the direction of the two tunnels and this is what I get.’

She relayed information from her data pad to each of us and we all saw it superimposed on our vision in the head up displays over our normal vision. She talked us through what she had calculated.

‘We have come I estimate about twenty feet from the well in a South Easterly direction. My compass indicates that the right hand tunnel heads straight towards the temple site, whereas the left hand tunnel heads off roughly due North. I think that rather than going North we should head in towards the temple and see if we can gain access to under it.’

‘I agree,’ Natasha said, ‘Lets start with the obvious way to go, straight to the temple.’

I was not sure, but I thought it was worth a try. ‘Okay, we will try the tunnel to the centre first.’ I said.

‘Why don’t we split up into two groups?’ Geshe-La suggested.

Dhammarakkhita looked at him hard and said simply, ‘Why?’

‘We could search twice as fast.’

‘But if one group found it, whatever it is, before the other then who would be remembered as the ones who found the secret of the structure under the temple?’

‘Is that a problem? We would all share the credit of course.’

‘Of course, but who would history remember? Geshe-La we must stay united at this time, one temple, one discovery, that’s the way it has to be.’

He looked at me and said quietly, ‘Deepa there have been too many factions and too much fighting in the past, at this time it is my deepest wish that there be not the slightest scope for sentiments of rivalry.’

I nodded, I could understand his feelings. Natasha could as well I think as she gave another argument for staying together.

‘Also there is safety in numbers and our comm links don’t work this near to the stasis field around the temple so I reckon we will have to stay together or we can’t communicate with each other any findings we make.’

Dhammarakkhita smiled, ‘In that case I insist we stay together. Modern management principles clearly indicate that keeping

communication channels open is at the heart of maintaining good relations.’

I said nothing, but I doubted that such ideas really applied in our situation. Personally I simply didn’t fancy exploring these tunnels without as much support as possible.

So we set off down the right hand tunnel. Natasha led the way, I followed at the rear. We all kept a wary eye out and I for one didn’t feel like making small talk. Step by step we moved down the tunnel. Down was the operative word as well as we headed down the sloping tunnel floor. It occurred to me that at this rate we would be on target for ending up about at the mirror position of the top of the temple, but under the ground. The walls of the tunnel were featureless grey First Buddha construction material.

‘Folks,’ Natasha said from the front of the group, ‘there is an obstruction up ahead. Slow down while we survey it from a distance.’ I stopped my heart pounding with anticipation.

‘Its okay it looks like some kind of a door.’ She paused then in a puzzled tone added. ‘This is odd. Perhaps you should all come up and look at this.’ Natasha beckoned to us all to join her and Emily.

I looked in astonishment at the door. It was circular in section above the floor level and seemed to be made of the same grey material as everything else. But it had a design on it. A multifaceted diamond like pattern ran over its surface of interlaced triangles. Inset into the geometric pattern was intertwined the figure of a seated meditating Buddha. Also very obviously there were three things missing from it. A gap in the design at the level of the forehead, one at the throat and one at the heart. Chandra went up close and shone his lamp onto the design.

‘I’ve never seen anything quite like this before, its akin to a Hindu Tantric Yantra design but combined with Buddhist imagery. Its unique. Its also damaged I think, it has three holes in it.’

I went up beside him and looked hard at the holes and smiled and said.

‘It is not damaged Chandra, it is incomplete, it needs three extra pieces added to it to complete it.’

‘What sort of pieces?’ Natasha asked.

‘Multifaceted, about the size of eggs, cut at the back like precious stones.’

‘So we need three gems to open it.’ Natasha said.

‘The triple gem?’ Dhammarakkhita said, ‘Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha? How can we put them into a door?’

I shook my head, I had got it, ‘That is exactly it Dhammarakkhita, they are the keys to the central chamber it seems. We need physical gems that represent the triple gem.’

I hesitated looking at the positions of the gem settings on the image and added.

‘But rather than Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha I think they represent Mind, Speech and Action.’

‘So?’ Dhammarakkhita replied, ‘what else do they represent anyway?’

‘Ha!’ Geshe-La said, ‘I didn’t think you Singhalese accepted such interpretations.’

Dhammarakkhita laughed, his voice echoing in the tunnel, and said.

‘The original Theravada Dharma contains everything, all of your teachings to, but you and I choose to emphasise different aspects, that is all.’

Geshe-La shook his head and replied.

‘I think I am going to enjoy this journey with you Dhammarakkhita more than I had expected.’

‘Humph, nice as it is this reconciliation between Buddhist schools,’ Natasha broke in, ‘it isn’t going to get us anywhere unless either of you actually have the physical three gems with you. Do you by any chance?’

Both monks shook their heads.

‘Back the chamber then I suggest and we try the other tunnel.’ Natasha swung round and we all followed her up the tunnel. I counted my steps this time. It was a 108 steps from the door to the centre from the entrance chamber.

We didn’t stop in the entrance chamber but walked straight through it and into the second tunnel. It was immediately obvious that it was very different.

I was the last to enter the tunnel and as I did so I realised it that it was completely circular in its cross section. I looked in astonishment at the walls. Instead of a featureless grey tunnel this tunnel was constructed of rough hewn granite blocks. Also every couple of yards along the walls there were niches inset into the surface. Each was

about the height of a person and about three feet wide. I was just wondering why they were there when the tunnel began to reverberate with a deafening din.

‘Back! Everybody back! Find a niche and get into it. Quick!’ Natasha shouted. I jumped sideways and crashed into the wall of a niche. Instants later I got the sense that something vast and heavy rolled inches from my body down the tunnel. The wind generated from the passage of whatever it was made all the hairs on my body stand on end. I waited a moment and then peered out of the niche. Ahead of me down the tunnel the others were also emerging from their niches. I looked the other way and stared in horror. The light from my forehead flashlight revealed the way we had come from was now blocked by a great stone ball that totally blocked the way back.

We all went back and stared at the ball. It was, what, about twelve feet or more in diameter and neatly filled the tunnel.

‘I get the feeling we are not going to get back out the tunnel that way.’ Natasha said.

‘It must weigh hundreds of tons, we could never move it.’ Chopra said.

‘Nor yet cut through it without explosives which might bring the whole tunnel down on our heads.’ Natasha added.

‘So the die is cast,’ I said, ‘we have to solve the mystery of what lays ahead if we are going to get out of here again.’

‘A sobering thought Deepa,’ Geshe-La said and then added, ‘not that it seems to me we had much choice once we found this place other than to explore it.’

Dhammarakkhita agreed by nodding and said.

‘All my life I have wanted to find out the inner mysteries of this sacred site, and I for one am sure that this is a unique moment in the history of the temple.’

‘Not quite unique,’ Uravashi added who had been looking in the various niches along the wall ahead. ‘Come and have a look at this.’

We walked over to her and stared at what she was shining her flashlight on.

‘Look, somebody who visited here before was not as lucky as us with their choice of niche.’

This niche was different in two respects. First there was a pin cushion pattern of metal spikes projecting from the rear wall of it.

Second impaled on them was a suit of chain mail and in a heap at the bottom of the niche were the bones of a man.

‘Sultanate period armour I think,’ Chandra said looking at the armour. ‘So others have been down here before us, but in this case they only got this far.’

We left the grisly reminder of the ancient temple raiders behind us and proceeded down the tunnel. Only now we looked twice before taking a step in case we triggered any more booby traps for unwary invaders like the one we had all narrowly escaped.

‘Shush all of you come up and join me,’ Natasha said and waved us forward. I crept forward and looked at what had caused her to ask us to all look. ‘Not another locked door.’ I hoped and prayed to myself. But it wasn’t that at all.

Rather we had arrived at the entrance to a larger chamber than any we had seen before, probably at least a hundred foot in diameter and fifty feet high. It was also dome shaped but this time at its centre was a railing which surrounded a stupa.

‘Amazing,’ Chandra whistled through half closed teeth, ‘Its a perfectly preserved Ashokan period stupa. God I would give my eye teeth to be able to show this at an archaeological conference back home.’ Without warning he walked out. My heart missed a beat, I expected something dreadful to happen. Nothing happened. I breathed a sigh of relief. Drawing my weapons I stepped out after him and together as a group we started to warily make our way round the pathway round the stupa.

I was now walking at the head of the group with Natasha bringing up the rear.

‘Look at the marvellous sculptures on the railings,’ Chandra said pausing to examine an image of a Bodhi tree in an enclosure on one of the roundel designs on the railings. ‘Incredible, I have never seen such quality of workmanship before, it seems that what survived to the twentieth century and later was only a pale remnant of the art that once graced Bodh Gaya.’

We moved ahead and had come about half way round the railing when we came to the gateway which led to the inner walkway round the stupa. At the entrance were incredibly lifelike carvings of two great doorway guardian figures. Each must have been nine feet high and held in one of their hands great staffs which were carved so

perfectly that you would have sworn they were made of bamboo. Chandra went up close to one of the images and stared at it in fascination. He was moving his hand to rub it over the surface when I saw the image move. I screamed.

‘Chandra! Jump backwards. Now!’ As Chandra leapt backwards almost somersaulting in the air as he did so the statues sprang from their positions and their staves sliced through the air and smashed onto the spot where Chandra had stood a moment before. Torches mounted on the walls burst into flame casting a flickering red glow everything.

I aimed my weapon and tried to pull the trigger. But sensed I couldn't. I looked in dread at the two figures who were now advancing on us. Not stone at all it seemed but some form of life which was waiting here, guarding here. I felt as if I was paralysed by fear and the only thing I could think of was the question. ‘Am I going to die in this tomb that time had forgotten deep in the bowels of the earth?’

‘I don't think so darling. Not now at least that is.’ I sensed a familiar whisper in my mind and moments later light surrounded me as a Yakshi spirit manifested from my body.

‘Whoa boys!’ Champa called out, ‘hold back these are friends not foes!’

The two Yakshas halted their forward progress and looked closely at us.

‘Friends? Friends of yours Champa? How do you know we can trust them?’

‘No problem, brother Jhambala I can vouch for them all, I have journeyed with them for many moons, they are pure of heart and servants of the Dhamma.’

The bigger of the Yakshas, Jhambala, grinned, and as he did so suddenly his grim and glowering face was transformed into a friendly smile.

‘That's okay then Champa if you vouch for them we will take your word of course. We have been down here for ages without visitors dropping round, nice to see you. Where is your friend Gopika these days?’

The answer was a sudden frenzy of light and sparkling all around us. Moments later the desolate cavern was filled with the sounds of

tinkling anklet bells and jingling belts and earrings dangling on the delicate forms of a dozen Yakshis.

‘Company!’ Cried out the second Yaksha and as if at his command a host of what I had taken to be statues sprang to life and leapt from the designs on the railing posts and joined the crowd of Yakshis and Yakshas.

I was utterly dumbfounded by this development. Chandra stood with his mouth hanging open staring in confusion at the scene. Chopra sidled up to Radhika and said in a low tone.

‘Don’t suppose these fellows would have anything to eat or drink perhaps?’

It was a silly question. Radhika reached out to a panel with images of fruit in a bowl in it and picked a handful of dates from it and offered them to Chopra.

‘What about a date to begin with?’

Chopra took the dates and bit into one and his face broke into a grin.

‘Delicious! Can I?’ He said pointing at a carving of a goblet. Radhika winked and as Chopra touched the goblet it seemed to come to life and he lifted it from the relief and held it to his lips and sipped.

‘Lovely, blossom wine I would say, rapidly becoming one of my favourites.’

Radhika laughed, her voice a rippling river of sound that swept us up in a wave of delight.

‘Mr Chopra! I do believe you must have been a Yaksha yourself in a former life.’

She put her arm round his shoulder and began to show him all the delights depicted in the reliefs that decorated the railings.

For hours it seemed we feasted on the pleasures of paradise depicted on the railings and eventually the wine and food, combined with all that we had been through, brought on their inevitable conclusion. In a blissful befuddled state we fell asleep sitting by the railings of the stupa of Jhambala and Kubera: the Yaksha lords of plenty. In the outer Bodh Gaya temple above it was close to midnight, in the inner Bodh Gaya below we slumbered in the embrace of eternal timeless reality.

I stretched my arms above my head as I woke after a deep and restful sleep and flexed my body. I sensed the soft touch of Chandra’s skin against mine and as I opened my eyes I untangled my legs from

his and ran my fingers through the hair on his chest. His eyelids flickered and opened and I stared into the pools of limpid light that were his eyes at that moment.

‘Deepa?’ He whispered, ‘Are we really awake or dreaming do you think?’

I touched his heart with my hand and kissed his cheek and whispered.

‘Life is but a dream Chandra, what matters is how you live the dream and that in the end you wake up and know reality as it really is.’

Around us the others were also stirring and Champa and Jhambala were coming over towards us. We sat up and straightened our clothing as best as we could. They also look a little ruffled as if their night had also brought more than just pleasant dreams to them.

‘Deepa, how lucky of you to find this place. The memory of its existence has been lost for so long we cannot remember the last time we got to meet the lords of this realm.’ She glanced at Jhambala and smiled. ‘I for one consider myself blessed to have found my way here and now it will be possible in the coming days to bring about a marriage of the outer and inner worlds again.’ She paused, ‘That is of course as long as we can find our way out of here again and establish a path between these levels of reality.’

‘So come on, get your party together and let’s get moving,’ Jhambala said and in a great and sonorous voice called out.

‘Let it be known the Lords of this place are going on tour and accompanying the visitors on their journey to the heart of mystery.’ He laughed, ‘So come on all of you, don’t hang back.’

They didn’t, and a little while later we were all up and getting ready to move. But before we set off Jhambala took my hand and led me into the inner walkway and then whispered to me.

‘There is something you must carry away from here if you are to succeed in your quest. If it wants to accompany you it will come to you of its own accord. Hold out your cupped hands and look at the crown of the stupa.’

I did as he asked and held out my cupped hands before me and gazed up. As I did so I saw a glittering cascade of light begin to spring from the railings at the crest of the stupa and I felt an electric sense of excitement fill my body. I seemed to quiver with an extra-ordinary

sensation and gazed in wonder as the light seemed to collect in the cupped palms of my hands. The pool of glittering light shone and twinkled and filled me with an incredible ecstasy the like of which I had never known before. I blinked. The light was gone, the water was gone, but round my neck now hung a necklace on which was suspended a single great gem of great beauty. A wish fulfilling gem. Jhambala gestured at me to transfer it from outside my blouse to inside and moments later the gem hung between my breasts, near to my heart, and hidden from prying eyes.

We set off from the stupa in a direction which Natasha said was due North. We had walked no further than about another couple of hundred paces along the tunnel when we sensed another change in its design. This time the tunnel opened up not into a domed circle but into a square. I looked for a moment and then saw that it was like one of the plazas in a first Buddha space ship yard. But different as well. By the light of our flashlights and with our vision enhanced by our sensory overlays I could see it was built of yellow sandstone and dust and bundles of some sort of objects were piled up in the arches which at first I had thought were the arcades of shops and offices of a ship yard. Chandra rushed ahead apparently enchanted by something. Dam, I thought, he is going to get himself killed at this rate. But somehow he escaped harm again and there turned out to be nothing threatening in this place as we investigated.

I gazed up at the roof of the chamber and a circular hole in it which was at the centre of the chamber. It looked like it might have been the base of a well I thought.

Beneath the well on the floor was the most incredible random pile of things I had seen for a while. It ranged from what looked like fragments of pottery and ceramics to books and manuscripts which were crumbled almost to dust. What had entranced Chandra was a sculpture of the Buddha. He brushed away the debris from round it and then sat down in front of it and slowly began to trace out letters inscribed on its base. After a couple of minutes he looked up at me and like a child in ecstasy on unwrapping presents at Christmas whispered.

‘Look Deepa, its a statue of the Buddha and it says on it, “this image of the Lord Buddha made at the behest of king Bimbisara”. Deepa, everybody thought that images of the Buddha did not start to be made

until at the earliest the first century of the Christian era, but Bimbisara was a contemporary of the Buddha. Deepa this is a priceless find, its an image of the Buddha made during his lifetime.’

I gazed at the calm features of the image and felt a sense of deep tranquillity in my innermost being. I could almost imagine it was a portrait of the blessed one.

‘My goodness you have to see this!’ Dhammarakkhita cried out and summoned us over to one of the alcoves. In it there was a great stack of hundreds of copper plates. I looked at them in perplexity for a moment and then picking one up looked at it. It was about two feet long and three inches deep, shaped like a palm leaf manuscript folio. On it were inscribed lines of writing in a script I could not recognise. Dhammarakkhita could though as he sighed and said in wonder.

‘These plates are written in Brahmi script, and if I am not mistaken they are sections from the Abhidhamma pitika of the Pali canon. See!’ He pointed at the text of one of them and said. ‘This is from one of the lists of points of dispute.’

Chandra was turning over plate over plate until he came to one and as he blew the dust from its surface and shone his light on it he whistled and looked up. The light from the copper panel reflected onto his features and added to the glow which animated his eyes.

‘This plate has a colophon: a section indicating who had the manuscript copied and where. It says that it was copied at the order of the Beloved of the Gods, the name Ashoka was known by, in the twelfth year of his reign at his capital of Patliputra and given as a gift to the new monastery at Bodh Gaya.’

He gazed up at the ceiling and said, ‘Do you think?’

I nodded and said, ‘Yes we are under the site of what became the great Singhalese monastery of Bodh Gaya but was from what you are saying also apparently was the monastery that Ashoka established here. Incredible eh Dhammarakkhita?’

‘Incredible does not begin to cover it Deepa.’

It was difficulty that we persuaded Dhammarakkhita that he could neither bring all the plates with him, there must have been hundreds of them, nor yet stay in the darkness with them.

Eventually we set off from that enchanted place and made our way along the tunnel that led from the far end of the plaza. Again we entered a tunnel made of rough cut granite blocks and as we pressed

ahead wondered where we would find ourselves next. Incredibly the Yakshas turned out to have not the slightest idea. It seemed that they had never thought to visit anywhere else but had always dwelt as long as they could remember in contentment at their stupa. Although Jhambala admitted, they had had occasional visitors. But he said.

‘You are the first we have let pass as far as I remember.’

Natasha calculated our trajectory now as heading almost due East. I pondered for a while and then realised where we were probably going.

‘Friends, I believe we are headed for the medieval Hindu monastery and I suspect now that its well will also turn out to have been an access point to this inner level of Bodh Gaya.’

What I didn’t anticipate is that first we would have to meet the next guardians of the treasures.

We had walked around a few hundred paces along the passage to the North when I realised I would have to stop for a moment, to answer the call of nature as they say. I asked the others to walk ahead a bit and then for lack of any other recourse squatted down in one of the alcoves in the walls of the tunnels. I was staring at the wall on the other side of the tunnel when I sensed that I was being watched. Heaven knows why when we are pissing we get so hypersensitive. To begin with I thought it was just paranoia and then I realised that there really were eyes looking at me from the shadows in the alcove across the tunnel from me. Then as I spotted the eyes I heard a whisper.

‘Don’t piss on me lady, its not nice.’

I jumped up in horror and stared down I was standing by a grating in the tunnel floor and eyes were glaring, red and angry, up at me from below the grating.

I screamed and ran hell for leather down the tunnel towards my companions.

‘Aaargh! There are watchers in the dark spying on us!’

Helter skelter I fled and my screams seemed to echo in the tunnel all around. Only they seemed to transform into dreadful banshee cries for a moment before they faded away into an ominous silence.

‘What’s wrong Deepa?’ Natasha asked, glancing around, ‘Where are these watchers?’

‘I saw eyes in an alcove and others under a grating in an alcove.’ I hesitated and then putting my embarrassment aside as ridiculous said. ‘One spoke to me as well.’

‘What did it say?’

‘I’m sure I can’t remember actually,’ I said.

A gruff voice spoke, ‘What I said was “Don’t piss on me lady, its not nice”, not hard to remember I would have thought.’

We turned as one and looked at the source of this dreadful admission of what had happened. Behind us in the tunnel stood a ghastly figure which looked as if it could have emerged from a nightmare. Although I guess it had emerged from the drain and not all of the dampness on its skin could be attributed to its own slime and puss which covered its green and blotchy skin. It was very evidently a ‘he’, that I could see clearly as he was naked and my full frontal view of his body left nothing to my imagination. I didn’t know where to look, I looked down, his feet faced backwards, I looked up and saw his face was disfigured by great fangs that drooped from his jaws. He was drooling sputum from his fangs and snot from his nostrils.

‘So lady got nothing to say for yourself? Caught you with you pants down eh?’

He descended into a maniacal cackling for a moment and then calmed down looking at the way we had all drawn our weapons and were pointing them at him. A puzzled expression crossed his twisted hairy brow and he said sarcastically.

‘What have you seed suckers got against us Vampires anyway?’

‘That you’re blood suckers?’ Chopra said slowly, it wasn’t the right thing to say.

‘Name calling will get you nowhere Mr Flat Foot Fatso!’

I suddenly realised what this fellow was up to and whispered to the others, ‘watch out he is distracting us while his companions creep up behind us in the other direction. Men, on my command, turn around and cover the other direction, women cover this direction: all of you fire at will. Turn!’

My foresight was only just in time I am afraid as the instant the men turned around a hoard of screaming Vampires rushed us from the back and countless more vampires appeared from the alcoves and niches. They had been going to jump us in a moment.

The sound of human energy pulse weapons filled the air combined the crack of Yaksha staves striking flesh and the sizzle of Yakshi magic. But the Vampires had powers of their own. Mostly in their powerful talons and teeth and their sheer numbers. I felt my ankles

seized from below as more Vampires reached through the grills in the floor of the tunnel and clawed at me. Yet more began to drop from vents in the ceiling and for a dreadful instant I thought we would simply be drowned in a dreadful sea of venom, pus, vomit, snot, sputum, piss and shit that the Vampires were raining on us by their very touch.

But things were not going as they expected. Their talons would attempt to scratch my skin and slide off my deflector shield. Their fangs would attempt to bite into the Yakshis slender ankles and be unable to gain a grip on the subtle fields with which they protected their forms. The Yakshas too had something which resembled defensive fields, or simply incredibly tough skin perhaps. But the Vampires were not immune from the Yaksha blows, Yakshi magic or energy pulse beams. After a first dreadful frenzied attack the Vampires fell back and withdrew leaving behind countless scorched, frazzled, broken and torn forms of their compatriots. I looked around we all still stood I thought, then I spotted that things were not well with us either. Geshe-La was crouched over Dorje and desperately chanting some sort of mantra.

‘What’s happened Geshe-La?’ I said.

‘His shield failed, the Vampires poison fangs penetrated his skin.’

‘Can he move?’

‘I will carry him,’ Jhambala said and scooped him in his arms.

I surveyed the scene and said to Natasha, ‘Back or forward?’

‘No U turns Deepa,’ we both cried out together, ‘forward!’

We tried to keep a consistent order as we advanced along the tunnel, the Vampires were maintaining their distance. Occasionally I sent probing fire into their midst and said to my companions.

‘We can hurt them from a distance, keep on firing at them as we go that may keep them away.’

So like a porcupine shoots its quills we advanced along the tunnel. It was too easy I knew there was something else up ahead. I looked back and saw that the numbers behind us were swelling moment to moment. I glanced forward the numbers were ebbing away as I watched.

‘All Stop!’ I cried and said to Natasha, ‘I get the feeling we are being herded towards another danger, what do you reckon?’

Natasha looked ahead and behind, ‘Yes it looks as if they are perhaps making some sort of a move. Although there is another possibility, there is something ahead they fear more than us.’

‘Bhoot-pret!’ Champa screamed and suddenly the tunnel filled with intense white light. For an instant I thought we had been attacked and then I discovered I was sharing my mind and body with not just Champa but Jhambala too.

Champa whispered in my mind, ‘Bhoot-pret are ghosts in your terms Deepa, energy based life forms like us, but malevolent, warped by past ill deeds they performed: negative karma. They possess humans and lead them to destruction.’

Jhambala’s voice echoed in my mind too, ‘But as we now possess you the ghosts may not be able to gain entry to you, we will fight them off. But beware they may try and lure you to your deaths ahead. Don’t believe any voices you hear now in your mind or with your senses.’

‘Even those that appear to be us.’ Champa whispered.

‘Take care everybody,’ I called out, ‘we are about to be attacked by ghosts, they will seek to lure us to our deaths, but the Yakshas and Yakshis will try to protect us. Even so don’t follow any apparent inner voices, follow only my commands.’

‘Natasha,’ I whispered, ‘Is this okay?’

She smiled wanly at me, ‘Deepa its your call, there needs to be one commander only in battle, I will follow your lead.’

‘Press ahead, follow me!’ I said and moved to the head of our group. As I did so I saw that Dorje was now lying prone on the ground and Geshe-La was staring in horror at him. Fumes and smoke were rising from every orifice in his body.

‘He is practising Tumo, inner heat, to drive the venom from his body, but I cannot carry him and he cannot walk himself.’

‘Guess its up to me then,’ Natasha said and picked up Dorje and carried him slung over her shoulder. We moved ahead.

I sensed lights moving around up ahead and we emerged from the tunnel into a vast cavern over which the path continued as a narrow bridge stretching into the distance over an abyss. I motioned to the others to halt and surveyed the situation. It looked as if we were in the heart of the ghosts abode. What better way to lure us to our deaths than to possess us and cause us to hurl ourselves into the abyss?

Perhaps the fact we are all ready possessed by spirits might protect us. I motioned to the others to follow and advanced out along the narrow bridge. As we carefully advanced I sensed that the eldritch light around us was full of swirling patterns of light that were hovering over our heads. As if seeking an entry point into our bodies. The ghostly glow grew in intensity as we advanced and the swirls and eddies began to settle over us and circle over our eyes, nostrils, mouths, and I could sense under my clothes our every orifice. It was a gross sensation like some invisible force seeking to violate my body questing and probing seeking entry. Deflector shields were I knew useless against such an attack, that sought to possess not our minds or bodies but our very spirits. Still we advanced and it seemed that they were unable to gain access to us due to the presence of friendly spirits possessing us.

I counted my paces, we were 187 steps over the abyss on the bridge when I spotted the dilemma we would be faced with. Ahead there was a cross roads so to speak. Another bridge intersected with ours. I would be faced by the decision of which path to take. It didn't take much imagination to realise that one or more of the bridges was not really there, or led to some other sort of doom.

'Straight Ahead? Right? Left?' I thought to myself, I heard whispering all around in countless voices.

Chopra's voice whispered, 'Straight ahead Deepa, surely that's the obvious way?'

Natasha's voice whispered, 'No that's a trap Deepa, it is right from here to the Hindu monastery I reckon, turn right.'

Chandra's voice whispered, 'Deepa, I have always found clockwise pays off in First Buddha structures.'

I tried an obvious approach. I checked out the three ways ahead by shooting at them. Each seemed to be real, no help there to tell me how to make up my mind.

It was my call, my decision would decide our fate again, left, right or straight?'

I called out, 'On my word follow me as quick as possible.'

I checked, everybody was ready, 'Turn Left!'

As we ran down the left path the lights screamed around our heads in a furious frenzy, as if cheated of our bodies they were making a last

desperate attack to possess us. But in vain, we ran down the last yards and headed into a tunnel again.

I shivered as we made it into the tunnel and the lights fell back behind me and thought, 'what would those other bridges have led to?' Perhaps it was better not to dwell on that and a few steps down the tunnel I called out 'All stop and regroup!'

Dorje was looking dreadful, his skin was suffused by a dreadful blue pallor and I found it hard to believe he was still alive. But that was the least of our worries I thought, for any moment we might be attacked by ghosts or vampires again probably. So we had to press on. The tunnel began to slowly slope down and as we moved ahead a dank smell started to fill the air.

'I don't like the feel of this,' Chandra said and sniffed the air. I sniffed too, it was rank and fetid.

'It's the river's smell,' Champa whispered in my head, 'still polluted by the use that men put the river to for so long.'

'Yeuch,' I thought to myself as we began to see damp slimy patches on the walls and the floor and the stones of the tunnel became slippery and treacherous.

'Take care everybody don't slip over in this muck if you can avoid it and keep your deflector fields up.'

'We are staying put in you too Deepa, there may still be ghosts lurking in such a place.'

I agreed it was a ghastly place, and getting worse every moment. I reached the shore of a sea of black slime and mire that covered the floor and one by one we waded into the putrid sea of ooze. Luckily it was mostly water and so it was not too difficult to make progress, but the surface was covered with encrusted compacted cakes of filth that must have taken millennia to build up in the tunnel.

Nor yet did it get any better, soon it was knee high, then waist high, then chest high. We had to start swimming eventually in the oily waters of what had become to be honest little more than a foul storm water sewer.

'How could the First Buddhas have allowed this to happen to their structure?' Chopra said as he swam along the sewer between me and Chandra.

'I don't think this is intentional Chopra,' Chandra replied, 'it must be some kind of a problem caused by neglect or human stupidity.'

The problem came to a head a few moments later when I spotted that up ahead that the tunnel roof dipped down right into the waters. We were going to have to swim under water. We had no choice we couldn't dream of returning to the nightmares behind us.

I stopped and motioned to the others and said.

'A deep breath and your shields should give us all about four minutes under water we are going to have to hope and pray that is long enough to find a way out of this. There is no point in me going first, we all simply have to get through, that's all there is to it.'

I am not sure what to say about the question I was then asked.

'How can Dorje do that?' I had forgotten our injured companion. I swam back to where Natasha was and looked at the way she was holding Dorje's head above the water. There was no sign of life in him any longer. Dam I thought what can we do?

'You can't do anything, but we can,' Jhambala said and I sensed him leave my body and in a shower of light drift into Dorje's nostrils. Dorje's eyes opened.

'Nobody home I am afraid,' Jhambala's voice issued from Dorje's mouth. 'But this is no place to rest for eternity I will motivate his body for him and swim it to wherever we have to go.'

So nine people and a zombie set out to swim down a drain deep in the bowels of the earth beneath Bodh Gaya. I led the way, the zombie Dorje followed at the rear. It would have been a strange sight us slipping into the black waters if anyone had been there to see us. Personally I prayed there was nothing watching us.

I breathed deeply and dived into the black waters and pressed ahead kicking out with as much force as I could down and down the tunnel descended. I kept my eyes peeled for any side tunnels or shafts. Eventually after an eternity, probably only a minute or two I sense a change in the water, it was becoming clearer as if the sediment had settled out of it. I had swum out into a great submerged shaft. I prayed that there was air up the shaft somewhere and I could reach it before I ran out of breath.

Like a shoal of fish we swam up the nightmare well. My lungs began to feel the strain of holding my breath and I had to let out a little breath as I swam up. I glanced down and saw that Dorje was supporting Geshe-La and together they were rising up the shaft at the rear. I turned my head and looked up.

My head broke through the water's surface and I shook my head and breathed deeply. The air was fresh and pure, the very breath of life itself. Moments later we were all staring in amazement at each other and at our surroundings.

We were undoubtedly in another one of Bodh Gaya's wells. This one was very odd indeed. It was not a circular shaft well, but a step well, in Hindi called a Baori. In form it was a long flight of stairs leading down to water surrounded by arcades on all four sides. In former times such wells were made for people to take refuge in the cool of the well enclosure from the burning Indian summer sun. Once it must have been a lovely and pleasant retreat from the heat, now it was a dark and sombre place where the sun never shone as somebody had at sometime roofed it over. Maybe I thought we are under the central courtyard of the old Hindu monastery.

The story that the world knows is that around 1600 a wandering devotee of Lord Shiva had made this spot his home and in time his followers had taken on the mantle of the lands of Bodh Gaya that must have once been born on the shoulders of the Abbots of the Great Singhalese Monastery. Looking around us we could see the story the world knew was not the truth. This must have been part of a great monastery from before the fall of Bodh Gaya to the invaders from central Asia who brought their new teaching of the love of Islam to this land. This place though was full of images that spoke of another side of the human religious experience. Every inch of the walls was covered in statues that depicted Tantric deities. Singly, in consort, in multiple pairings, performing all manner of acts which broke the taboos of society. Or maybe spoke of the mores of early ages in the history of mankind when the dividing lines between sex, magic and mysticism were not drawn so clearly: if at all.

In the darkness our lights only lit fitful glimpses of the images around us as we mounted up the steps that led, we hoped, to the way that continued from here. Chandra had been looking in wonder at the images and came over to me and pointed out something.

'Deepa these images are like the Tantric statues that were preserved in the Hindu monastery in the early 21st century. But like the images on Jambhala's stupa they are all simply much better in workmanship than anything I have ever seen.

‘Champa,’ I asked in my mind, with a sense of dread, ‘do these images have the power to come alive like those at Jhambala and Kubera’s stupa?’

I sighed with relief as she said, ‘no Deepa these are just stone and metal images, there is no real life in them, they are creations of the imaginations of men, not real spirits like us Yakshis and Yakshas. We are real like you, with parents and families, but these images are empty of both self essence and conventional selves.’

I told her to relay this assurance to the others and we all breathed a sigh of relief. I turned around and stared back at the well’s entrance to check that there was nothing following us. The water was quite still. But as the beam of light from my torch passed over the far wall I sensed that there was a sculpture carved into the living rock. I was looking at the feet of a great statue, so vast that we had not seen it to begin with.

‘Look everybody, behind the well there is a statue carved in the wall.’

Chandra, Chopra and everybody else played their light beams over the surface and as we ran our lights up its form we saw that it was a vast standing Buddha. Unlike the other images it was not Tantric in form at all.

Chandra shook his head and said.

‘That image is much older than the other stuff here. The Tantric material is from the Pala dynasty which ruled this area from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. That image looks like it was made in the Gupta period, around the third to the fifth centuries. But I have never seen a monumental image like that from that period.’

‘Why not Chandra?’ I asked.

‘They were all destroyed with the passing of time, but not it seems this one.’

Our lights were now playing on the face, a serene visage of the Buddha’s sublime smile. As my light ran down the form again I gasped.

‘Chandra, could that be a gem where the Buddha’s heart would be?’

Chandra craned his neck and shone his light on the same spot.

‘Certainly Deepa, Chinese pilgrim’s accounts of Bodh Gaya speak of how precious gems were set into the eyes of the Buddhas, so why not in the heart of an image like this?’

So now I knew our next problem. How to get that gem, it must be the second of the keys we needed. This would represent perhaps the gem of action, the heart of the practice of the Dhamma as exemplified by the community of the followers of the Buddha, the Sangha.

Still my present problem was not the symbolism but how to actually lay our hands on the thing. But how could we get any where near it all? In fact I realised that it had been probably made very hard to get to the gem deliberately in order to frustrate would be tomb raiders exploring these caverns.

We all sat for a while on the steps staring at the image and thinking of schemes.

Natasha suggested, 'Why don't we get to the top of the statue and then climb down on ropes?'

Chopra reckoned he couldn't see how to do that because he said pointing above the image. 'Look the walls around the statue are all glassy smooth and there is a dome shaped umbrella above its head which makes abseiling down it very difficult.'

Emily had another suggestion, 'Why don't we rig up some kind of rope bridge from one side of the statue to the other?'

She paused and added, 'Also to be honest I simply don't know if we have enough rope.'

Jhambala who was still sharing Dorje's body with his spirit, which he said was now back in his body and making a slow recovery, suddenly broke in.

'What a lot of foolish ideas you people have. Why not simply wish for the gem to come with us?'

I raised my eyebrows and smiled.

Chandra said, 'Its worth a try, okay.'

He stood up and said solemnly, 'I wish that the gem come with us on our journey.'

Nothing happened. I breathed a sigh of disappointment and as I did so I felt the gem between my breasts and thought to myself, 'I wish that this second gem too were hanging on this necklace round my neck between my breasts.'

Something happened. The image began to glow with an inner radiance and then the light all flowed and merged into the central gem and it became bright and shining and the whole well structure was lit by thousands of beams of brilliant light that glittered over the stone,

gold, silver, and precious stone, images in all the niches in the walls. For a moment I was dazzled by the rich imagery all around and turned away from the statue, then I looked back. The gem was now separate from the image and floating in space by its own accord it seemed it drifted across the well space and came and hovered in front of me. Then it gradually grew in brilliance until in a climax which washed over me like the ocean over the shore I was totally absorbed into the light of the gem. Then the light faded, and I felt, two gems near to my heart.

‘I have the second gem,’ I said in an awe struck voice, not quite believing it myself. I reached up and touched my hand to my necklace, it had two gems on it.

‘Let’s make a move Deepa, who knows what else might manifest here if we stay in this place.’

Looking around at the imagery I agreed, after all who would want to meet Vajra Varahi Yogini in person?

We hurried up the rest of the steps and found ourselves to our relief in a familiar kind of structure, a domed entrance chamber. It had only two exits that were open. The one we had come in from and one more, to its left, so that was good. There was one more door but it was shut and I didn’t like the look of it. I suspected it might have once have led to the Tantric Monastery itself. But that was not of interest to us at this time. We hurried by that door, time stained wooden panels carved with figures of dreadful deities involved in unspeakable acts.

Rather we set off along another rough hewn rock tunnel. This time it was neither First Buddha smooth construction material, nor blocks of granite, but rather cut through the living rock of the bedrock of Bodh Gaya itself. Like the last tunnel this was also damp, but unlike it there was no sense of dankness or anything displeasing. Instead it seemed to give a sense of cool comfort to the tunnel.

After we had walked perhaps several hundred steps the tunnel did something that no previous tunnel had done which we had been in. It simply began to get wider and higher and we began to walk through a cavern that grew step by step in size as we advanced. Gradually, impossibly, light also began to fill the way in which we walked. I looked up aquamarine windows seemed to be inset into the cavern ceiling. Looking for all the world like a pattern of streams and ponds gently meandering through a sylvan landscape.

As the light grew I saw that the walls here didn't look any longer as if they were hewn by hands from rock, but rather as if they had been worn over incalculable aeons by the action of running water. At my feet too there began to appear as we advanced plants covering the ground which grew amidst rock pools and streams and channels of clear water that was bubbling and rippling along in a myriad of watercourses.

In my mind I sensed the murmur of the Yakshis and Yakshas discussing something amongst themselves. One voice, 'Do you think?' Another voice, 'I do believe...' A third voice broke in, 'It must be, how wonderful. Will long lost friends meet again?'

The voices broke off their conversation and in a slow ecstasy of radiance emanating from our bodies the spirits who had protected us on this journey manifested their physical presence. Now our company was trebled in number and together we made a merry troop as we strolled though the subterranean landscape lit by the water light from the sky lights in the ceiling.

Then amidst the fern trees and cycads which were forming a dense forest on the floor of the cavern we met our hosts in this part of inner Bodh Gaya. We rounded a corner on the path through the forest and saw sitting on a rock by a stream the youthful figure of a naked man who was combing his long hair while humming to himself. He looked up and said.

'How nice you have made it through the perils of the maze, congratulations.'

He paused and picked up a mirror and looked in it for a moment checking his hair. Then he put the mirror down and laughed.

'I think I am ready for the party now.' He looked at us and said. 'But you all need to bathe and change into more festive attire, please make yourself at home here and take a bath in our waters.' He smiled and slipped from the rock into the waters, as he did so his human form seemed to metamorphose into that of a great serpent and start to swim away down stream.

It seemed the Yakshas and Yakshis needed no more invitation as they stripped off and dived into the pond instantly. We all stood around feeling foolish a moment. Then I thought, 'hell, why worry about nudity, after all we have been though together?'

I stripped off and dived in, all the others did as well apart from three of our companions. Dhammarakkhita said that he would see if there was another pool nearby, and Geshe-La agreed that might be better and they both went around a bend in the stream and after a couple of moments we could hear them splashing around in the water as well. That left only poor Dorje who still lay unconscious on the shore of the pond. As we swam and bathed a serpent swam through our midst and as it climbed out onto the sandy bank where Dorje lay metamorphosed into a beautiful woman. She leant over Dorje and as she did so she pulled from her forehead a gem which she wore in the centre of her brow. She placed it on Dorje's brow and then gently parted his lips and blew air into his lungs. As she did so the colour returned to his cheeks and moments later he opened his eyes and gazed up in wonder.

'Where am I?' He said.

'In the realm of Muchalinda lord of Nagas.'

'Who are you?'

'My name is Pundarikaja, daughter of Muchalinda.'

Dorje smiled and sat up and looked at her and said.

'Thank you for giving me back the gift of life, please take your gem stone back again.' As he said that he took the gem from his brow and placed it on the brow of Pundarikaja who blushed as he did so and dipped her gaze to the ground.

'You were wandering in distant lands stranger, now you can join us in this land.'

As I listened I wondered if there were several levels to their conversations and they were speaking about more than the restoration of Dorje's life essence to his body.

'Pundarikaja, that is a lovely name, what does it mean?' Dorje asked.

'Born of a white lotus,' Pundarikaja replied.

Dorje grinned and said, 'How wonderful, it reminds me of a precious teacher of our tradition.'

'Really?' Pundarikaja asked, 'was he born of a lotus too?'

They fell to talking and I felt it better to not eavesdrop any further.

Later we were all refreshed and bathed. The Yakshas and Yakshis looked splendid in their traditional robes and wraps. For ourselves I felt we were a mite dowdy in our uniforms. I was just contemplating

this when a group of Nagas came out of the trees and offered to loan us clothes for evening. I chose a turquoise blue sari with gold work in its hem and after I had combed my hair out and done it up felt I was looking quite respectable. The men were all wearing dhotis and kurtas in soft natural silken colours that somehow made the jewel like quality of our saris more splendid. I in turquoise, Uravashi in maroon and Tara in yellow.

‘You look like the three graces incarnate!’ Chopra quipped.

I joked back, ‘Or perhaps one of us embodies one or other of the eight virtues of the Noble Eightfold Path?’

Tara giggled, ‘In that case perhaps I embody “Right Livelihood”. After all as a politician I seek to provide employment to as many of my constituents as possible and to ensure the greatest benefit to the greatest number.’

Uravashi waved her finger at Tara and said, ‘I am not at all sure if that is what people think of politicians in general but maybe in your case, I am willing to make an exception.’ She turned to Chopra and said, ‘What about me then, what virtue am I?’

‘Why you are the perfection of morality Uravashi, of course, you never drink, eat meat nor cause any offence to anybody as far as I know. In terms of the eight virtues I think you would be “Right Speech”, as you always speak in such a way as to benefit others and never in a malicious or harmful way. What do you reckon?’

Uravashi blushed and looked down at the ground whispering. ‘You are too kind.’

Tara laughed, ‘I like this game Chopra. What of Deepa then, what perfection does she embody?’

‘I am sure I can’t say, she might be any or all of perfections rolled into one.’

‘Okay cut it out,’ I said, ‘enough of this tomfoolery we are going to a party and we wouldn’t want to be late would we?’

‘Very wise decision,’ said Champa coming up and putting a garland round my neck. ‘Nagas are sometimes a little itsie-bitsie bit fractious at times, it doesn’t do to get in their bad books.’

As we walked through the forest the Naga kings palace I could hear Chopra quizzing Tara behind me. ‘So what do you reckon I am then?’

‘The embodiment of a flat footed policeman?’

‘No really? A sort of real life action man?’

I thought to myself, no I can't see Chopra as action, maybe effort, but not action.

Anyhow the time for such idle speculations was short as we approached the palace. I was kind of expecting a grand building with a many pillared hall and high towers flying flags from the pinnacles of its topmost spires. I was very surprise then to find out that the Naga palace actually appeared to be a rock pool in a bend of the river. It was surrounded with reeds and round stones on which frogs were sitting and relaxing in the mellow light.

'Champa, is this the palace? Where are the buildings?'

Champa looked at me strangely and giggled. 'You expected a human palace built above the Earth? Naga palaces are under the water. Deepa, we must dive deep into this frogs world to find delights at the Nagas banquet.'

'Excuse me,' Chopra coughed, 'isn't that a bit difficult? After all we can't breathe under water even if Nagas can.'

Gopika laughed and said, 'Have no fear Chopra dear, these are not worldly waters, these are the waters of the deeps, they already run within your veins. Some even say that biological life forms like yourself began as micro-organisms in deep springs within the primordial abysses of the first oceans. I am not so sure of that myself, but what I do know is this, the breath of life runs in these waters as it does in the air above. Come on darling, let us dive deep into the well of life and savour its tastes.'

It was true. As I ducked down and put my head under the water I let out my breath and breathed in. I expected to choke and splutter, but instead it was as if I was standing on a mountain peak and breathing in the clearest air imaginable. I smiled and waved at Champa and held my thumb up to show that I now believed what she said.

'You don't have to communicate by signs alone Deepa in these waters.' Champa said: and I heard her even through the water.

'That's right Deepa, the waters of the deep pose no barriers for what passes as sound in this realm, so stop messing around on the surface and dive with me deep into depths of the well of life.'

It was turning out to be a bit much today I felt. Somehow I had become used to fighting demons, vampires and ghosts and thought nothing strange of that I realised any longer. I acknowledged after all that they were part of the everyday life of the human psyche, if not of

the phenomenal world of modern humanity. But breathing water? I shook my head and asked Natasha what she made of it. As she swam she was using the sensor array on her data pad to scan everything we passed.

‘How can we be breathing water Natasha? Surely this is impossible?’

She nodded and replied, ‘Impossible, certainly, terrestrial organisms such as ourselves can’t breath water, but then according to my sensors this isn’t water at all.’

Ah I thought, ‘what is it then?’

She frowned, ‘what is registering on my sensors is a normal atmosphere in a state of flux that is constantly cycling in every instant from liquid, to gas, to solid, to liquid again: but not changing temperature as it does so. Each and every particle around us seems to be in a constant state of phase fluctuation. While it is outside of our bodies it tends to be longer in the liquid part of the cycle, but as it contacts us it changes phase emphasis in the cycle and becomes primarily gaseous.

‘But I thought air could only liquefy at low temperatures and become solid near to absolute zero, why aren’t we freezing to death?’

‘I am not sure, and where is the energy involved in such a fluctuation of phase state coming from or going to? Normally changes of state involve energy inputs and outputs: like a refrigerator where the power drives gasification of a liquid coolant which causes the temperature to drop, so where is the power coming from to drive the phase changes and why aren’t we freezing as a result?’

Menaka swam up and said, ‘what an interesting conversation. Doesn’t freezing refer to a decrease in the level of activity in particles?’

‘Yes, in a sense,’ Natasha replied.

‘Then what is the temperature of spontaneous existence in which all particles are simultaneously in all phases of existence, and non-existence, in which energy, matter and sentience are also but phase changes and in which space and time themselves manifest and subside from moment to moment?’

I lost track of their discussion of what Menaka called ‘The state of Primordial Empty Clarity’. To be honest I couldn’t make head or tail of her description of the science of it.

What I could see through the limpid clear waters of the well was that we were swimming down now to a palace that met my expectations of what a palace should be. It was vast and stretched in all directions on the floor of the chasm at the heart of the deeps. As I gazed in wonder I also realised I had seen it before, it was another version of the outer Bodh Gaya again. This innermost, perhaps you could describe it as a secret Bodh Gaya, was subtly different. The main difference was that the Great Singhalese Monastery was apparently in this realm the palace of Muchalinda.

Dorje had spotted this too and questioned Pundarikaja over it.

‘How come there are no monasteries and only palaces here?’

She looked at him with a cross expression and said.

‘Don’t you dare ask that question of anybody else here but me, it is a sore point with us Nagas and Naginis. We were not allowed to ordain by the blessed one. In fact if you were a monk you would know that Dorje, humans have to swear to not being Nagas in order to become monks or nuns. No, don’t ask that question, it makes my blood boil just to think of the injustice of it.’

Bubbles started to rise from her skin for a moment and then she sighed and said.

‘But whatever, in one life we are Nagas, in another humans, in another Yakshis or gods: in the end it all equals out I think. But it’s a sore point with us all. Please don’t mention it again, especially to my father he is very sensitive on that point.’

We were swimming down over the Mahabodhi temple of this realm. It was similar in form to all the others but I saw that its surface was undulating and glistening and shoals of fishes were swimming amidst its surface decorations.

Swimming past the temple spire on the way to the palace entrance I suddenly realised that the temple spire was not stone: it was living coral. Nor yet was the Bodhi tree here a normal tree.

‘A coral tree,’ whispered Uravashi, ‘how lovely.’

Indeed I wished we could have swum down and spent time sitting beneath this incarnation of the tree, but there was no time. Pundarikaja urged us on saying.

‘Come on don’t hang around here, you can always come back and look later.’

I thought to myself, ‘that isn’t all ways true, but let that be as it may be.’

The palace gate way was a high triple arched structure richly embellished with carvings. Dorje swam down to the threshold and as they landed on it they began to walk forwards along the floor. I did likewise finding that within the confines of the palace buildings we were once again in normal atmosphere.

Inside countless Nagas and Naginis were waiting to greet us and they welcomed us with garlands and made places for us to sit down at a great table ready for us.

Before we sat down we were taken and introduced to Muchalinda himself. In his human form the king of the Nagas appeared as a grey haired and stately king dressed in rich robes and wearing a coronet of gems on his forehead.

‘Welcome to my realm sons and daughters of good families. Seekers after the true law are always welcome here and it is no easy task to navigate the maze and find your way here. Enjoy the evening with us and tomorrow we can talk of matters of mutual interest. Then I will show you the texts we guard of the teachings of the blessed one that we keep here, the words of the Lord recorded directly from his teachings in Bodh Gaya. But for now enjoy the feast and forget your worries for this night.’

Sitting down at the high table I looked around, we were surrounded by gems. The walls, ceilings and floors glittered with gems set into white marble panels. They depicted lush foliage and serpentine floral forms in glittering hues of amber, beryl, jade and turquoise. Even the tables we sat at were inset with complex geometrical patterns of tessellated triangles in ruby, jet and carmine coloured precious stones.

We were possessed by hunger after our day of adventures and ate and drank until we had sated ourselves completely on the foods we were offered. Rice and soft vegetable dishes, water chestnut halwa and sugar cane juice and sweet curds and milk. Unlike other Indian foods I had ever tried these were all mildly flavoured and used hardly any spices.

‘Lovely old fashioned grub eh?’ Champa said, ‘stick in the muds these Nagas, good enough for our ancestors is good enough for us they say. They don’t hold with all these new fads for wheat and barley foods.’

‘What of potatoes, tomatoes and chilli?’

Champa shook her head, ‘They can’t abide foreign foods like that, not even the things like chickpeas, cumin and garlic that that nice Mr Gilgamesh brought with him to India with he visited the Nagas searching for the herb of life.’

Chopra’s ears picked up, ‘The herb of life? What is that?’

‘Soma, have you ever tried it Mr Chopra?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘Its hard to come by these days I expect, but it grows nicely in a few places in the mountains I hear say these days again, now that man has left the land.’

Chandra leaned over to me and whispered. ‘Deepa what of the third gem do you think it is here.’

‘I hope so, but with so many gems all around I don’t know where we would begin to look.’

‘Hum, I have to agree, and I seem to recall that Nagas tend to guard their gems rather jealously so we may have problems here I suspect.’

‘My feeling too Chandra, but for the moment let’s see what the evening brings, but stay alert to for clues: or danger.’

After the feast finished musicians appeared who sang songs telling of the Nagas and tales of their love of treasures. Dorje and Pundarikaja got up from the table and we could see them wandering around the great hall. One after another the Naga princess was showing Dorje all of the precious things which embellished the palace.

A few minutes later Dorje came back and said to me.

‘Deepa, you must come and see the chamber beyond this, there is something there I think you will find most interesting.’

I got up to follow him and then he said.

‘Perhaps you should all,’ he emphasising ‘all’, come with us as well.’

We took the hint and all got up and followed him. Through an archway we came to a marvellous round hall with a domed roof. In the centre of the floor was a fountain which emerged from a great white marble chalice shaped vase. It was decorated with such an array of gems that the room seemed to glitter with a sparkling light that flickered over everything in it. The fountain itself stood before a

collection of statues which represented the scene of the Buddha giving teachings to the two lay merchants after his enlightenment.

I was mesmerised by what I saw. For the statues were like all the others covered with gems: but what was fascinating me was a great glowing gem that glittered on the throat of the Buddha. It was at his speech cakra, it was the size of an egg. It had to be the third key. The gem of the speech of the Buddha.

Without realising what I was doing, I thought to myself, ‘Oh how I wish that the gem of the speech of the Buddha was also on the necklace round my neck.’

To my horror as I completed my thought the statue seemed to glitter and coruscate with light and the gem winked more brilliantly than before hiding all the others with its brilliance. Slowly imperceptibly at first it separated from its mount and began to float towards me.

The Yakshis stared in amazement for a moment and then Pundarikaja hissed.

‘What are you doing to the jewel of the Dhamma? You had better stop it or you are going to be in big trouble.’

I shook my head and whispered, ‘I cannot stop what is happening, I wished for the gem and it is coming to me.’

The Yakshas looked around and slammed the doorways to the chamber closed. The Yakshis grabbed hold of Pundarikaja and implored her.

‘Nagini princess do not harm these humans, they are like children born under an autumn moon, they know not the ways of this place. Forgive them their actions.’

Pundarikaja screamed, ‘I can forgive them, but my father will never allow them to leave this place with his prize possession. The instant they leave this chamber he will sense they carry the gem with them, he will not tolerate thieves in his realm.’

‘But, but....’ I cried and tried to wish the gem back into its mount, but perhaps I had used up my three wishes with the wish fulfilling gem I had gained at Jhambala’s stupa. The gem inexorably advanced and as it approached me it flashed brighter and brighter until with a blinding burst of light it manifested on my necklace. Glittering on my neck it was so brilliant that there was no way that anybody could have missed it anyhow. For I was now the principle source of light in the room. The combined radiance of the gems seemed to have increased

exponentially and I saw my whole body was now glowing with rainbow light.

Suddenly from beyond the doorway a voice was raised.

‘What’s going on in there? Hey! You in there! What are you up to?’

Moments later we could hear cries and alarms sounding outside and I heard a great roar.

‘What! Gem thieves? In the hall of the precious vessel?’

Jhambala said, ‘we can protect the entrances for a while but we are few in number the Nagas numberless. What can we do?’

Pundarikaja bit her lip and stared at Dorje and said, ‘I gave you back the gift of life. I cannot now dear Dorje be the one that witnesses the irreversible utter extinction of your spirit by Naga venom.’

She glanced at me and smiled and said, ‘there is one way for you to escape, you must dive into the precious vessel and escape via the passage through it. I know not where it leads, for it is a maze that no Naga has ever penetrated beyond the golden door. But be quick for once the Nagas enter this chamber they will pursue you like your own shadow through the maze and if you cannot find your way through and out the golden door they will certainly kill you all.’

Champa cried out. ‘Deepa, we must part here I fear, we will stay with the Yakshas and protect the doors for as long as we can. In truth the Nagas cannot harm us, but you they will surely now kill, so flee, flee!’

We needed no further urging as the Nagas were now battering at the doors and screaming and crying out.

‘Thieves, tricksters, tomb robbers!’

We leapt as one into the precious vessel and dived deep into its waters. As I swam I remembered again a couplet from the riddle.

‘Autumn Moon’s sons and daughters, seek secrets in precious vessel’s waters.’

So now the riddle was almost complete, if only we could escape the Nagas who might any moment enter the chamber and leap in the water and pursue us.

After a few moments the tunnel branched, left or right, I resigned myself to making executive decisions. That is I picked at random, but quickly. I swam into the left tunnel. Again another branch, and another, and every time I swam to the left. After about twenty

branches in the path I sensed a sound of hissing from behind us in the distance through the not quite water.

‘We are coming to get you thieves of gems, the Nagas will be your nemesis!’

I swam as fast as I could left, left, left and then up ahead a glow of light became visible. Swimming faster and faster I kicked out and pulled forwards with the long stroke of a swimming style learnt in the fast flowing tide of the river Akash Ganga home on Hindustan. The golden glow was coming up fast, my heart was beating fast as I approached. How would I be able to insert the three keys? More to the point how could I do it quick enough for us all to escape?

An instant later we were all at the door. It was like the first door we had seen after entering the wishing well but glittering and golden. It had three missing stone settings. I looked at it and thought, ‘I wish the gems were simply in their settings.’

They were.

The door swung open. We swam through. I looked back the Nagas were speeding down the tunnel towards us, like a hoard of enraged serpents coursing through a stream and bearing down on their prey.

‘God how I wish the door was closed again and the gems were back on my necklace!’

It was and they were.

‘Bugger me,’ I thought, ‘I am beginning to get the hang of this wish fulfilling gem business.’

‘Deepa,’ I heard Chandra whisper and turned round, ‘Look!’

Beyond the three realms: 01/05/4456 19:54

We stood in the centre of a crystal sphere. All around us numberless stars beyond count were glittering in the depths of space. Scintillating and twinkling billions of billions of multicoloured points of light, new born stars, illuminating expanding clouds of interstellar gases.

Natasha whispered, ‘Its as if we are standing at the centre of the universe moments after the big bang and watching the very first stars forming.’

Maybe she was right. But as I spun around and stared at our surroundings I realised I had been wrong. We were not at the epicentre of the sphere. We were standing on a path that ran round a

central structure. It was a crystal dome and running round the drum it stood on were a number of symbols carved underneath thrones.

‘Where are we Chandra?’ I said in perplexity.

‘More to the point Deepa what do we do?’ He replied.

‘And what is this thing we are standing on?’ Chopra said.

We walked around the crystal dome. It must have been about twenty feet in diameter, not much more I reckoned and about ten feet high. It was transparent and inside it in the intersections and facets of the crystal it was as if there were two empty thrones.

Chandra was studying the thrones. Each of them was like one of the bases that statues in India sit upon. It had four columns at its corners and two lion like creatures were supporting a central symbol in a circle. On the top of each was carved a cushion.

‘There are eight of these thrones in a ring around the dome,’ he said having studied them all. ‘The symbols on them are: a conch, an umbrella or parasol, a flag or victory banner, golden fish, a wheel, what looks like a knot, a lotus and a precious vessel.’

‘How come there are no statues on the pedestals?’ Chopra said looking at them

‘And what do the symbols represent?’ Natasha said.

Meanwhile Dhammarakkhita had been standing near the throne with a conch symbol on its base and looking at the stupa, he shrugged and turned and looked out at the stars and said.

‘I must say that this is very confusing I am always searching for the right view on things and I feel close to having it here. But to be honest I am feeling quite exhausted now and I think I need to sit down for a moment.’ He started to sit down saying as he did. ‘Excuse me.’ The instant he sat down the symbol on the throne he was sitting on began to glow and scintillate and he began to lose all colour. As the gem separated from its setting it drifted like a new born star into space and Dhammarakkhita disappeared. As we all gazed in wonder at the gem it floated over to me and settled along with the other three gems on my necklace.

‘What on Earth?’ Chandra said.

‘We are not on Earth Chandra.’ I replied, ‘I don’t know where we are but it is clearly no place where normal laws apply.’ I said this as I was looking at the throne on which Dhammarakkhita had sat.

‘Where has he gone? Do you think he is all right?’ Chandra said. I smiled and pointed inside the dome. One of the thrones at its centre now seemed to have a ghostly occupant. The serene image of a meditating Singhalese monk.

‘I think he is okay.’ Chandra said looking at the smile on his face.

‘Remember the game you were playing in the Nagas realm?’ I said.

‘The what virtue do I embody game?’ Chopra said.

‘That’s the one. It’s time to play it again I think.’

Tara laughed and said, ‘Well I had better find the symbol for Right Livelihood it seems.’ Chandra nodded and I smiled and pointed at the wheel symbol.

‘Try that one, commerce runs on wheels after all.’

Tara shrugged and said, ‘The wheels of industry and all that eh?’

She sat on that throne and as she did so the symbol gem lit up, separated, and floated over and joined its companions on my necklace. Whilst she faded from view.

The second throne in the dome now seemed to have a ghostly presence on it as well: a blissfully smiling image of Tara.

I looked at them all and said. ‘So the conch represented Right View. Perhaps because the sound of a conch is like the sound of the Dharma teachings, it gives you a true view on things.’

‘Or it wakes you up when you hear it sound!’ Chuckled Dorje.

I continued looking at the symbols and wondering about their associations.

‘The parasol, in ancient India was held over kings and sacred things. So it might represent the most sacred of all things: the resolution to act so as liberate all sentient beings from suffering.’

Dorje laughed and said, ‘I am going to try that one then because I have always had the resolve to benefit all living beings.’

He sat on the parasol throne and its gem manifested in the twinkle of an eye on my necklace. His image somehow seemed to combine with Dhammarakkhita’s and represent a blend of Right View and Right Resolution, Singhalese and Tibetan traditions in perfect unity.

Uravashi sighed and said, ‘What sign might represent Right Speech?’

‘A flag? Perhaps because a flag symbolises victory, in this case maybe the victory of the Dharma, which is made through speech which accords with the Dharma.’

Uravashi said, ‘Shall I?’ Pointing at the flag throne, I nodded, she sat down.

The gem was on my necklace, she was joined with Tara in the dome, the union of Right Livelihood and Right Speech.

‘What’s left Deepa?’ Chandra asked.

I replied.

‘A fish, a knot, a lotus and a vase: action, effort, insight and meditation. The fish embodies Right Action: jumping out of the water of samsara. The knot embodies Right Effort: drawn neither too tight nor too loose effortless effort succeeds. The lotus must represent Right Insight: it blooms spotless in the mud of samsara. And finally a vase of treasure must represent meditation: when we meditate we are like a vessel of water, all we need to do is to sit and the water will become clear.’

‘So who is who?’ Chandra asked. We worked it out by trial and error.

It turned out Chopra was Right Effort, Natasha was Right Action, Emily was Right Insight. Each of them as they sat on their respective thrones liberated their stones, and in return become merged with the images on the thrones in the dome. Finally only myself, Chandra and Geshe-La were left.

I tried the throne, no effect, Chandra tried the throne, no change.

Geshe-La grinned and said, ‘How nice, I must be the embodiment of Right Meditation, well at least I have got that bit right eh? Oh yes, and I reckon it must be pretty obvious by now that you two embody Wisdom and Compassion eh?’

So saying he hopped up on to the throne and as he disappeared the Right Meditation gem appeared on my necklace and the dome simply disappeared leaving us standing by the seated images on the two thrones.

I looked up in awe at the infinite stars of space and said, ‘Chandra what would you think of this poem.’ And I sang, ‘Everybody knows, the universe is full of countless stars; but rare is the one who realises, every star is full of countless universes.’

Chandra looked deep into my eyes and said, ‘I think I would say: everybody knows, the heart is full of compassion that knows no limit; but rare is the one who realises, compassion is full of the heart that knows no limit.’

Then we both smiled at each other and I said, ‘perhaps neither is quite right, lets try it with space and form.’

Our voices rang out in harmony, ‘everybody knows, space is full of infinite forms; but rare is the one who realises, every form is full of infinite space.’

As our song faded into the empty clarity of space I looked at Chandra and said, ‘shall we?’

He nodded.

We sat down on the thrones and as we merged with the Eight links of the Noble Path it became a new paradigm, the Noble Ten Fold Path.

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The Goddess flickered into existence next to the icons of Chandra and Deepa seated on the platform at the epicentre of the state of empty clarity.

She undid the necklace from Deepa’s neck and said to her, ‘Thank you, I believe this necklace is mine actually.’

Then she stood back and stared at the images of Chandra and Deepa and said.

‘Okay let’s try again: only this time let’s see what happens with a male and a female Buddha in the program.’