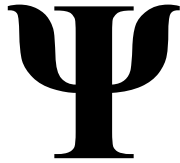


JOHN SHERWOOD ILLSLEY

SYSTEM RESET



System Reset

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**How beautiful they are
How beautiful the lordly ones
In the hollow hills.**

-- Fiona Macleod (1855-1905)

CHAPTER 1

“Nikos. Get this clear in your stupid head. I am not coming to your bloody party!” Lucy held the mobile phone away from her ear, hoping that her half brother might lose his temper. But Nikos knew that Lucy would always try to annoy him. So he didn’t rise to the bait. In the end Lucy would always lose her temper before he did. It was an old game and one that Lucy rarely won. It was her fatal flaw.

“You know,” he replied calmly, “Yesha and I only hold these parties so that we can find a suitable man for you and Imogen. You really should try to cooperate. It’s very important.”

“I’ve been to your parties before. I’m not going to allow myself to be shagged by complete strangers on the remote off chance that one of them is on the same psychic frequency as me. Anyway, I’m not coming back to England for another week and then I’m going straight back to Keele for the start of term.”

There was a long silence. Lucy surveyed the casual rows of naked bodies bronzing in the September sun. The sea lapped placidly at the edges of the golden sand. At the far end of the beach a group of gay men were quietly skimming frisbees at each other over the water. It was very peaceful.

“Where are you?” Nikos asked eventually.

“I’m on Skiathos. On a nudist beach. So there.”

“Oh, bloody hell Lucy, you can do better than that. Nudists? They’re all lumpy. For God’s sake. If you want to see beautiful bodies and big swinging dicks come to my party.”

“Sod off Nikos !! They’re real human beings. Anyway, that’s where I am.” Lucy looked around at her naked companions to see if anyone was listening to her conversation, but nudist beaches can be very discreet and in any case most of the naked bodies were middle aged, middle class and German and knew better than to eavesdrop on mobile phone conversations.

“It’s very nice here,” Lucy continued, “very peaceful, except for the bloody round the island boat which comes close inshore at three o’clock so that the oiks can gawp at the pervy nudists. It amazes me that there are so many people out there who have never seen tits or willies before. What’s the big deal? Surely they must have naughty bits of their own, don’t you think?”

“Dunno. Alright, alright. I’ll get back to you when you’re in a better mood. Where are the others then?”

“Mummy has gone back to England with Drew and Sonja. Sophie and dad and Imogen are taking *The Three Lovers* back to the Lavrion marina. Then they’re going to Athens. I’ll join them there. Drew is sending a plane for us.”

“And you’re not going to come to the party?”

“No, Nikos. I’m not coming to your bloody party. Sod off!” Lucy hurled the offending phone into the sea. The couple on the next pair of sunbeds looked up, startled, and watched the lithe bronzed body uncoil itself from its own sunbed, shake its torrent of platinum blonde hair and run into the sea after the phone. Lucy retrieved it from the shallows and looked at it ruefully. It was beyond salvage. She was now out of touch with the world. No matter, there was another phone in her hotel room.

“Broken, is it?” said the woman on the next bed, fortyish and slightly overweight but completely at ease with her pendulous body.

Lucy shrugged, “I’ve got another one,” she said, “I hate them really, but they are so useful.”

“I know,” said the man, “I always keep mine turned off. Except when I need it.”

Lucy smiled at them and relaxed. She was used to the casual nakedness of her extended family, and to the licentious nudity of Nikos’s infamous orgies. But these were private affairs and the bodies on display were always young and always perfect. This was different. The bodies here came in all shapes and sizes and ages and their owners seemed totally unselfconscious about them, from the flabby cellulite pocked bottoms to the firm and toned athletic gods and goddesses. And the strange thing was that in spite of the variety of bodies they were all curiously anonymous. Sometimes Lucy thought that she recognised some of their faces in the evenings, wandering around Skiathos town, or in the restaurants and tavernas, but in their clothes they always looked different and she was never quite sure. It was clothes which gave them their discrete identity. Here they all merged into one quintessential human form, stripped of all concealment.

There was nothing erotic about it and nobody seemed to judge or to care. It all seemed entirely natural, strangely comfortable and curiously liberating as though the nude bathers were unconsciously recalling a primal memory of a time when naked proto humans had roamed without shame across the fair weather Eden of palaeolithic Europe. And, after the first flush of curiosity at the extraordinary variety of male and female bodies arrayed around the small beach, she had stopped looking and settled down to reading the proofs of uncle James’s latest novel, which was based on the extraordinary lives her parents had led when

they had been students over thirty years ago in an age when sex and nudity seemed to have been almost *de rigeur*. It was Nikos's fascination with the accounts of Drew Quatermain's King Kong parties and the more intimate sexual rituals of the Circle of the Square of Three which had galvanised him into organising his own parties in the hope that wild orgies would somehow unearth men with the psychic powers which he had inherited from his father.

But men like his father, and Yesha's father Drew, were unbelievably rare and neither Nikos nor his two fathers had ever found anyone quite like themselves. So whilst he and his wife Yesha enjoyed the capacity for psychic sex which they had inherited from both of their respective parents, his sister Imogen and his half sister Lucinda had never found a compatible man and, although they were no strangers to heterosexual sex, they preferred an incestuous psycho sexual relationship with each other to imperfect sex with normal men. Lucy didn't much care. The psychic powers and the telepathy which she shared with Imogen and their respective mothers and fathers were more of a burden than a blessing. Most of the time she tried to suppress them. But it was difficult. Even now she could tell what the couple next to her were thinking, which was a confused mish mash of where they would eat tonight and what they would do afterwards. Lucy didn't want to know. So she put up her defensive barriers and reverted to the more pedestrian medium of the spoken word.

"Is this your first time here?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Lucy replied.

"It's nice isn't it. Such a lovely beach. And it's lovely swimming without clothes isn't it. We've been coming here for years. Just for the beach, and the rest."

"What are you reading?" her husband asked, rolling onto his side to reveal a very large flaccid penis. Lucy looked away. It was not that she was unused to the sight of male genital organs, and the ones she usually encountered were rarely flaccid for long, but in this context it seemed rude to look. She had got used to falling asleep on her front with her head on her arms and then waking up to find that the loungers had been rearranged to face the sun and she was looking directly at someone's meticulously shaved pudenda. She and Imogen also followed the current fashion for genital depilation but it was a little disconcerting at close range, especially on men.

"*Scholars and Gentlemen* " Lucy replied, "it's a novel. Written by a friend of my parents. Actually it's based on a novel my father wrote thirty years ago, when he was a lecturer in a crappy university."

"Is it any good?" the woman asked. Once the ice was broken, nudists seemed eager to talk to someone else, as though the act of shedding their clothes created an invisible barrier to communication which they were desperate to overcome.

"Well, I think so. Bit long winded in places and very academic. Sparkly chick lit it is not!"

"What's it about?"

"Well, on one level it's about nasty academics plotting against each other. But on another level it's about the conflict between reason and faith and about psychic enlightenment and spiritual revelation. It's a bit weird reading about what one's parents did when they were young. Especially the sexy bits. One doesn't think of one's parents as being like that. So sexy. Bit gross, in a way. Odd thing is, they're still like that."

Lucy had inadvertently gone further down this road than was entirely proper and she felt the disapprobation in the minds of her companions. What families did behind closed doors was not for public consumption. What Lucy's extended family did behind closed doors defied all conventional *mores*. She was more prudish than her parents and sometimes resented her mothers sleeping with Drew Quatermain, though she understood why they did it, and, since her father didn't seem to mind, why should she? As Lucy progressed through James Sinclair's book she had become more intellectually aware of the strange forces which bound her extraordinary parents so closely to each other and which she herself was so determined to deny. For the older members of her family sleeping with each other was almost a form of worship. They had always done it, though Caroline and Sophie had stopped sleeping with Drew now that he had remarried.

The strange sexual ritual of the Square of Three which she was currently reading about in *Scholars and Gentlemen* had faded into the past. Latterly they had slept with Drew to give him comfort and company, but now Drew enjoyed the beguiling body of his new wife who did not expect to be shared with the other members of the Circle, though she did consent to take part in their naked meditation rituals where her own psychic insights were valued. Her parents were, Lucy thought, at last growing up. But then again, she had once enjoyed Nikos's parties, though they were really just orgies for young city swingers and lacked the sacerdotal commitment of her parents' sexual games. Now she was simply bored by them. She and Imogen had given up any hope of finding uniquely compatible men, and both were tired of screwing chinless frogs in the forlorn hope of finding a psychic prince. If such a man were to come into their lives it would be through

fate rather than fornication. In the meantime Lucy rather fancied her boss, but more for his intellect than for his body.

"Interesting," said the man, rolling onto his back, "perhaps I'll read it. Who's it by?"

"James Sinclair."

"Oh yes, I've heard of him," said the wife, "nice books, and very sexy, and he likes happy endings doesn't he. I like happy endings. Do you really know him? What's he like?"

"He's a friend of the family," said Lucy in a noncommittal voice, "he is nice. When we were children we used to call him uncle James."

"He's very rich isn't he," said the woman.

"Yes, I suppose so," Lucy had been taught from birth not to reveal too much about the true identity of her family, which was more bizarre and dangerous than this couple could ever imagine, though if they did read *Scholars and Gentlemen*, and realised that it was based on real people and events, they would come close to the truth. But James had changed names and places to distance them all from the original manuscript, which Lucy's father Marcus had completed and abandoned over thirty years ago.

"Perhaps I'll read it, when I get home," the woman said.

"Well," Lucy countered, "I'm afraid it hasn't been published yet. This is just a proofing copy."

The man looked at the cover, then looked quizzically at Lucy.

"Doesn't say Sinclair on the cover. And don't proofs come as unbound galleys? I've published a few things myself....I know about these things."

Lucy sensed curiosity and distrust. She looked briefly into his mind. He was an academic. A medievalist, like her father, and therefore a sceptic. She decided to end the conversation by leaving the beach.

"He uses print on demand publishing for his proofs. He thinks it's easier to read bound books than galleys. When he's satisfied with it he will send it to his publisher. And he's publishing this book under a pseudonym because it's different from his other books." That wasn't the whole truth. Like her parents Lucy could not lie, but she belonged to a generation which habitually concealed its insecurity behind half truths some of which came close to being outright lies.

"Think I'd better go," Lucy said, "and ring my brother. On my other phone. He means well. I've just got a bit of a temper. I'd better apologise to him. So nice to meet you. Please excuse me." She picked up her bag, smiled sweetly, and left.

The man watched the girl with the immaculate figure amble down the

beach, savoured the rhythmic flick of the slim hips and tiny bottom, the firm athletic breasts, the long blonde hair and the fine featured, delicate, nordic face. Like Uma Thurman, he thought, or maybe Claudia Schiffer; long, blonde and leggy anyway. Then he wondered who she was. Perhaps she really was Uma Thurman. Celebrities and film stars had been known to come to this beach to swim in the nude. And did she really know James Sinclair? On holiday people can be whoever they like. Maybe she was just a fantasist. But she was certainly one hell of a looker. He wondered if he would recognise her with her clothes on. People tended not to look too closely at faces on nudist beaches for fear of being recognised elsewhere. Anyway, if she came back tomorrow he would ask her who she was. Then he remembered regretfully that he would be going home tomorrow. The naked girl on the beach would remain a mysterious memory.

As she reached the end of the beach Lucy retrieved her diaphanous sarong from her little bag and wrapped it round herself before entering the small hotel which straddled the rocky promontory dividing the two adjacent beaches. She was greeted by the owner and her daughter.

“Do you know what is this herb?” Simone’s mother extended her hand from the sleeve of the kaftan in one sensuous serpentine movement and held it under Lucy’s nose so that the pungent fragrance of a very familiar herb flooded her olfactory senses.

“Yes,” Lucy replied, “it’s basil.”

Simone’s mother shrugged her shoulders as though surprised that this English girl should know the name of such a common Greek herb.

“Humm,” she said, “it is called basil because it is king of herbs. It is holy herb. For God.”

Lucy knew this too, but did not intend to embarrass the lady. She looked at Simone, who smiled at her and shook her head. Simone was a mirror image of her mother. Late twenties early thirties. Petite and very Greek with long wavy dark hair and dark brown eyes. Rather like Sophie, Lucy thought, and Imogen. She had warmed to Simone from the moment she had met her.

Simone surveyed the slender blonde who was dressed only in an exiguous sarong which clung to her wet body like a second skin, revealing almost as much as if she had been naked.

“There is a fax for you, just arrived.” Simone produce a printout from under the reception desk and handed it to Lucy. The fax header had the familiar Trikos triangle logo. Throwing the phone into the sea had not been a good idea. It was from Drew Quatermain’s PA who had

resorted to the antiquated fax the minute the automated surveillance computer reported the death of the phone. There would be a slight change of plan. Lucy would not need to go to Athens to join the others. The Trikos executive jet would stop by Skiathos and collect her. She could have some extra days on the beach.

“You work for Trikos?”

“No,” Lucy hesitated. She had learned from long experience that it was unwise to reveal her true relationship with Trikos and resorted to her customary gambit when faced with this kind of question, “I have.....shares in Trikos.”

Simone sensed that she was not being told the whole truth, but did not pursue it. It was not any of her business and her own wealthy family had warned her about giving too much away about herself to strangers. This was a dangerous world. Especially for the children of the super rich.

“Forgive me, Dr Hannay.” Simone said, “I have been thinking that I know your name. There was at my university in England a Professor Scott Hannay. It is an unusual name. You are related perhaps?”

“My mother, Caroline Scott Hannay,” Lucy replied. Simone smiled. She had never actually met Professor Hannay, but she knew all about her because her combination of wealth, beauty and devastating intellect made her something of a campus celebrity, known and forlornly admired by students who could not begin to aspire to her standards.

“You are very like her. As much as I am like my mother.”

“People say so. I don’t know. I try to be different, but it’s not easy. We are very similar in looks and personality. Even though I was brought up by someone else.”

“She is a philosopher, I think.”

“More or less. Medieval philosophy and theology. Did you read philosophy?”

Simone shook her head again. “No, I am not so clever. I did Tourism and Hotel Management. But it was ten years ago. Is your mother still there?”

“No, she left when the government started meddling with the universities. She didn’t like the managerial bureaucracy.”

“And you are iatros, doctor of medicine?”

“No, not medical. I have a doctorate in astrophysics.”

“Po po!” said Simone, slightly awe struck, “astrophysics!”

“You have not clothes,” Simone’s mother looked concerned, “where are clothes?”

“I have some clothes, in my room. I don’t need many clothes.”

Simone's mother pulled a face.

"And you are at the Little Banana beach. You English. You love the sun too much. Look at them." She pointed at the rows of naked bodies baking on the beach, just visible through the heat haze rising from the terrace from which Lucy's trail of wet footprints had already disappeared, "no shame." She laughed, "I do it too. Why not to do it. It is, how you say, natural."

"Ignore my mother," Simone laughed, "Anyway, now I can offer you a better room. One with balcony. Because you came here without booking, the room you have is not so good. But now there is free a better one. Would you like to see?" Simone was anxious to please someone who might just be important. A celebrity of some kind whose presence here might be good for the image of her hotel.

Lucy nodded.

"Then come with me."

The two young women left the reception desk and plunged into the cool dark corridors of the hotel.

"You speak excellent English," Lucy said, following Simone.

"Thank you. Well, I went to the American College in Athens and I was in England for three years at university. So English is almost my first language. Do you speak any Greek?"

"A little. One of my mothers is half Greek and as a family we spend a lot of time cruising in the Aegean."

"You have two mothers? How so two mothers? Your mother is divorced?"

"No, it's a long and complicated story." Lucy instinctively trusted Simone and, whilst she was not prepared to talk about Trikos, she was prepared to tell her more than she was prepared to tell the couple on the beach. "We are an unusual family. My mothers are not formally married to my father. My father is the Scott part of my name. Caroline Scott Hannay is my birth mother. My other mother is Sophie Scott Devenish and she brought me up as a child with her own children, my half sister Imogen and my half brother Nikos. And Yesha."

"Stop, stop. You are named for your mother? Too complicated Lucinda, may I call you Lucinda. Too complicated."

"Most people call me Lucy."

"Ah yes, Lucy. A child of the light. Yes, of course. Here is the room. Better. It has balcony and looks onto other beach. So, no naked bodies. This used to be Xenia hotel. You know of Xenia hotels."

"The Colonels built the Xenia hotels, in the sixties."

"Yes. My family has other hotels. On Corfu and Crete. This is ugly

hotel but in fantastic place, between the beautiful beaches. My father has given me this one as a challenge. I intend to make it boutique hotel for rich Greeks. Not tourists. It needs much work. My brothers have best hotels. Family,” she pulled a wry face. “So. Two mothers. One father. Your father must be...” She started to laugh. She gripped Lucy’s bare arm then let it go suddenly, as though struck by an electric shock. She looked at Lucy intently, trying to make sense of the complex images which had flooded into her mind.

“I’m sorry,” Lucy lied, “must be static. From the sarong.”

Simone crossed herself and backed away from Lucy, unsure of what had happened.

“Well, anyway, you can have this room. Better collect your things from other room.” There was now a hesitant uncertainty in her voice. She closed the door on Lucy and retreated rapidly down the paved corridor.

After a few minutes Lucy returned to the small room at the back of the hotel, which had no balcony, though there was a window looking out onto the nudist beach. She retrieved her few clothes from the wardrobe together with the spare mobile phone which she always carried as a backup in case she succumbed to her temper. Lucy resented her movements being electronically monitored by the Trikos smart phones, but in her heart she knew that Drew Quatermain was fearful for her safety and was doing his best to protect her and her siblings from the malign consequences of extreme wealth. So the trashing of a phone was usually accompanied by a sense of guilt and contrition. When she got back to her new room she first rang the Trikos PA to confirm that she was okay and had received the Fax message. Then she rang Nikos.

“Sorry Nikos,” she said, “I lost my temper.”

“It happens too often Lucy,” Nikos replied in a hurt tone of voice, “you really need to control it.”

“I’ll try,” Lucy replied, “and I will come to one of your parties, but not this one. It’s too near the beginning of term. I’m too busy. And anyway I’ll have my period then. So I won’t be much fun will I.” Lucy was white lying and Nikos knew it because all of the women in his extended family could control when their periods came, if they came at all. But he deferred to her because it was only a little lie and arguing might annoy her and cost the company another phone.

“Okay, then I’ll cancel this one and arrange one later in the year. In a month or so. When you and Imogen can both come. You should come you know. It’s not fair to expect Yesha to screw all these men on your behalf. She’s my wife after all.”

"I think Yesha enjoys it," Lucy said sadly, "according to James's book her mother was unbelievably promiscuous. She's like her mother. We're all like our mothers. Unfortunately."

"Yeah, but she does it for a reason. You know as well as I do that it's not just about sex. It's about finding people like us."

"It's a lost cause," Lucy replied, "there are loads of women a little like us. I've just this minute met one, in the hotel. But no men. So we just have to live with it. Imogen and I are quite happy with each other you know. And I've got the hots for my prof... so... anyway I'll get back to you when I'm in England. Yassoo."

Lucy relaxed and looked round the darkened room. It was a simple room, typical of Greek hotels from the seventies but unsuited to the new millennium. There was a bed which was little better than a mattress on a low concrete base, and a small recess in which was installed a shower, wash basin and toilet. Simone was right. It needed a complete make-over. Lucy sighed, unslipped the sarong and lay back on the bed which was more comfortable than she had expected.

The naked body was as near perfect as it could be. Uniformly and naturally bronze brown. Long legged and athletic with small, high, firm breasts and snake slim hips. And a sombre Nordic face offset by a very sexy mouth and crowned with platinum blonde hair which she normally wore tied back in a single tight plait. She was as like her mother as two peas in a pod. Naked, it was almost impossible to tell them apart, even down to the huge bow with which both of them habitually tied off their plaits. Lucy wondered where her mother was, and, more important, where her beloved half sister was.

She allowed her index finger to slip between her legs and thought of Imogen. It wasn't strictly necessary but they had learned at puberty that their psychic powers were enormously amplified by sexual arousal. It was the quickest connection to Imogen's libidinous soul. As Lucy began her gentle orgasm Imogen floated into her mind and kissed her with transcendental passion. She was sitting cross legged in the bows of *The Thee Lovers*, sailing gently along the North coast of Euboea *en route* for the marina at Lavrion. Imogen turned her head so that Lucy could see her father and Sophie in the cockpit and for an instant all four minds connected with each other in an intimate melding of love and joy. In her soul Imogen hugged her half sister and comforted her with the thoughts of the shared pleasures of her sensuous body.

Lucy moaned with psychic ecstasy and withdrew from her sister lover's mind. They would be together very soon to share each other's flesh as well as each other's minds. No ordinary man could equal the

sensations which entranced them when their bodies and souls fused into one. Like their mothers in their youth, Lucy and Imogen had hurled themselves into lives of unbridled promiscuity in the hope of finding the rare men who shared their telepathic talents. They had not been so lucky as their parents who had found Marcus and Drew and happily shared them for their love and strength. So, in default of a suitable man, they took consolation in each other, until the right man would appear and then they too might have to agree to share him, as Caroline and Sophie had agreed to share Marcus. In her imagination Imogen faded with a kiss. Lucy lapsed into fitful sleep and with sleep came the dreams which were a hated part of her genetic legacy.

This time she was back on a beach, the same beach that she had just left, but now there were no sun beds, no ramshackle cantina, no Xenia hotel. Instead there were more than six hundred men on the beach. Oarsmen and marines, some naked, but mostly in loincloths or short kilts, the crews of three great galleys, *trieres*, triple banked Athenian warships with massive bronze rams and stems painted with elegant oculi and surmounted by a great wooden horn. At the stern a fan shaped wooden canopy curled over the seat of the trierarch. Here they were beached and vulnerable, but at sea they became fabulous creatures. The three banks of oars would rise and fall like the wings of a giant bird. The stern became the upcurved tail of a monstrous fish and the bow the snout of a fierce horned animal.

These galleys had been detached from the main Greek fleet at Artemisium and posted to this remote island to watch the straits and report on the movements of the Persian fleet advancing from Therma. Now they were pulled up onto the beach to dry out and their crews were being consoled by local women who had loosed their chitons and given these doomed men everything they could give in the hope that it would raise their morale and buy them the protection of the Gods, or at least allow them to die with happy memories of willing bodies.

She looked up at the unknown face of the man who had just made passionate love to her for the first and last time.

"They have more than a thousand ships," he said, "we have less than three hundred. How can we win?"

She hugged him tightly and struggled to find an answer.

"Your admiral Eurybiades is a great admiral. And the Gods will be with us. You will see."

"I fear the Persians," he replied, "they are so many. And there are Greeks who have betrayed us. And the Spartans. They have not sent all their troops. Only King Leonidas and his Three Hundred. The rest are

just Greeks.”

“We must trust the Gods and our leaders. You know the prophecy.”

“Three hundred is not enough. King Xerxes has his Immortals who cannot be killed. I fear the Persians.”

“You must be brave,” she said, “for Greece.” She hugged him again, pressed her soft body against him and drowned his doomed face in soft flowing waves of dark and scented hair. She did not know him. She did not even know his name. He had come from Aegina and hardly spoke the same Greek. But for this moment she loved him with all her heart and all her body because she loved what he was fighting to protect and feared the rape and slavery which was the Persian gift to humanity. And she knew that he would not live because she could see his future in his soul. These three long elegant galleys would be surprised by a larger fleet of Persian scouts and defeated in battle. One would escape, but the other two would be captured. She would watch it happen from the hills behind this very beach. The Persians would bring their prizes to the shore and as a sacrifice to their gods they would spreadeagle the bravest Greek across the ram of his beached *trieres*, emasculate him and then ceremonially cut his throat. This man. Then the waiting women would be raped and enslaved. The Persians were coming. Thermopylae was coming. The red soil of Greece would once more be anointed with the blood of heroes. But Greece would survive, as would the child she had just conceived whose progeny would carry her special genes farther into the future than even she could imagine.

Lucy woke in a cold sweat. She hated these psychic excursions into the past and had found no way to control them. It was cool and dark in the room. She got up and opened the shutters onto the little balcony which overlooked the beach and let in the light.

CHAPTER 2

In another room, in an anonymous federal office building three thousand miles away on the East side of Manhattan, Mike Throckmorton relaxed in an armchair and prepared to deliver his report to his boss. Mike was archetypally tall dark and handsome, with the body of a Greek god and an alluring smile which most women found fatally attractive. Throckmorton was the right man for this assignment for a variety of reasons, not all of which were instantly self evident either to his boss or to Mike himself. Wavell Meredith stroked his bushy white moustache, took off his reading spectacles and looked quizzically at his latest acolyte.

“Seen this?” Wavell held up the New York Times.

“Yeah.”

“Iran and China? We should be worried,” Wavell growled, “if this Iranian diplomatic initiative succeeds we’ve got big problems. They’ll overrun our forces in Iraq. It’ll be Vietnam all over again. Ignominious withdrawal. We can’t win this. If we stay they will wear us down with asymmetrical warfare and use our flailing incompetence to turn other Muslim states against us. If we withdraw they will think us weak and expand their influence. Other Islamic states will fall into line. Then we’re going to have a genuine superpower in the Middle East, probably with nuclear weapons. They’ll control all the oil and then the bastards will have us by the balls. And if the Islamic government in Pakistan does join them they’ll definitely have nukes. We’re looking at world war three here. The fucking Persians are coming. Where is our Thermopylae going to be, eh?”

Michael Throckmorton looked at his shoes.

“They can’t get here so easily. Europe is more vulnerable. Do you think they could get into Europe?” he asked.

“They’ve done it before. Depends on how Turkey reacts. Militant Islam is a powerful force. If they think they’ve got the edge they will go for it. They got to the gates of Vienna in 1529. With the whole Muslim world behind them who knows what they could do. There are a hell of a lot more of them than there are of us. And they have large potential fifth columns in most western countries, even the States. And they don’t care how many die. They all go to paradise if they die for Allah.”

“Well then, maybe we’d better be polishing our nukes and thinking of Salamis. These people live in deserts. We can take them out with

neutron bombs and leave the oil installations intact. But God forbid it comes to that.”

“Well, nukes are not the only option, there are biogenetic weapons as well. I’d be more worried about them. Anyway it’s not our department. We’ll leave it to the big boys upstairs. CIS is strictly corporate crime and malfeasance. Strictly small beer. Which brings us on to the business for today. So give me what you got, ready or not.”

Wavell’s accent was restrained and Bostonian. Mike enjoyed these meetings. The elderly professorial Wavell, with his unruly shock of white hair and long, lined, craggy face, reminded him of his doctoral supervisor in Cambridge. Tweedy, academic, relaxed, intelligent and collegiate. Reporting to Wavell was much like giving a paper at a seminar, though he was not quite sure why he had been given this particular assignment. He opened his file.

“Well, first off, this company is squeaky, squeaky clean. I’m not sure why we’re looking at it. These guys do nothing wrong. They file their tax returns. They donate vast sums to charity. They don’t deal in arms or oil, anything like that. They’re like Google. They think no evil and do no evil.”

“Perhaps,” said Wavell, “maybe that’s the point. They think no evil. Those who think no evil often see no evil. So just play the game. Tell me what you got and then I’ll tell you why we’re interested.”

“Okay. First the company. Trikos is unusual for two principal reasons. For one it is very large and very rich. In the top fifty in the world. And secondly it is unusual because it is still privately owned. It holds controlling shares in many subsidiary companies, including some top US companies, but Trikos is still in the hands of its original founders. It’s full name is the Trigonikos Group. Greek name, means triangular, three sided, but it’s owned by Englishmen, a family really, and it trades under the abbreviated name Trikos. It’s not quoted on any stock exchange, though some of its subsidiaries are. It has fingers in many pies, all of them entirely legit. Its core interests are hotels, travel, airlines, shipping, eco-energy, publishing, computing, telecommunications, synthetic biology and genomic engineering, and pharmaceuticals. At the moment pharmaceuticals is its primary concern trading under the name Trikopharm. It uses profits from the other businesses to fund research into drugs so that it keeps its costs down. It sells its drugs more cheaply than its competitors, especially in the Third World. As you know it recently offered a solution to AIDS, which works, though nobody knows how. Except, presumably, Trikopharm. And they’re virtually giving it away. That’s not popular in some quarters. But, as I said, they do

nothing wrong.”

“No,” said Wavell, “until now they’ve never put a foot wrong. They are always one step ahead of the market. They made a fortune out of dotcom but they got out just before it crashed and they’ve survived everything since. They have always second guessed the stock market. Other guys make mistakes. Branson, Gates, Buffet, Soros, those guys. They all make mistakes. But Trikos? Trikos never makes mistakes. Don’t you think that’s odd? How is it structured?”

“They have nominal offices registered in the States for their US holdings and there is a big office in Zurich, but Quatermain doesn’t have a head office as such. He runs it all from his luxury motor yacht. Probably for reasons of security. Otherwise it mainly operates in England and Europe. There is also an Australasian division. They allow a considerable degree of autonomy for their subsidiaries. It’s a kind of flat structure of management. There is a board of directors to which each subsidiary grouping reports, but Drew Quatermain keeps a tight hold on the whole thing. I’ve got a breakdown of all their businesses. It’s pretty complex, but it’s not crooked.”

“Tell me about the ownership.” Wavell took his pipe out of his pocket, looked at it, and then put it back. Smoking was not permitted in these rooms even if he did allow himself to disobey his doctor.

“Trigonikos was first registered as a limited company in London in 1973 and was initially owned by three people. Drew Quatermain, of course, Marcus Alexander Scott, and Adrian Martin Graves. Scott and Quatermain were at university together. Graves was in the City of London, but went to school with Quatermain. Eton. Very blue chip. Most people think Quatermain is the principal shareholder, and he is now, but the principal initial investment came from Marcus Scott.”

“Who is?”

“An Englishman. Ex academic. Medievalist. Cambridge degrees. Lectured at St Deiniol’s University College in the seventies. But something went wrong and he resigned. Now a country gentleman. He’s a non executive member of the board of directors.”

“St Deiniol’s University College? What in hell is that?”

“Welsh University College. Doesn’t exist anymore. Absorbed into its big sister. Now part of Bangor University.”

“Bangor Maine,” Wavell was laughing.

“No, Bangor Wales. It’s a good enough school.”

“Okay then. Tell me about Scott.”

“Not much to tell. He keeps a very low profile. Ostensibly he’s a country gentleman. He has an estate in the North of England.

Somewhere called..." Mike looked at his notes, "Croxtton. Croxtton Hall. He donates most of his income to charity and seems to spend a lot of his time sailing in the Med. There is one slightly odd thing about him though. He has what amounts to two wives.

"Two wives? Jesus H Christ, one was enough for me!"

"Well, he's not actually married to either of them but they have been with him almost from the beginning and he divided his shareholding in Trikos between them. That's why he's no longer the principal shareholder. Still, between Trikos and his landed wealth he's a billionaire and they're both multi millionairesses."

"Children?"

"Three. Twins, a son and a daughter by one of his 'wives', name of Sophia Katerina Devenish, ex St Deiniol's history student. Son's name is Nikos. History at Oxford. Bit of a playboy. Has a house in Hanover Terrace London and throws swinging parties for rich friends. His twin sister is called Imogen. She went to Cambridge and read English, but now seems to stay at home with her parents. The other 'wife' is more interesting. Her name is Caroline Hannay. Incidentally both of them have changed their names to include his patronym. So she now calls herself Caroline Scott Hannay. She was an academic too, professor of medieval philosophy at," Mike paused again, "University of Surrey. But gave it up in the nineties. Don't blame her. British Universities have strangled themselves with red tape and professional management. Now an independent researcher. Bit of a diva. Expensive clothes, fast cars, and very, very clever, and looks like ...well...take a look." Mike handed Wavell a photograph of a stunningly beautiful blonde woman.

"Humph..." Wavell muttered, "looks a bit like Daryl Hannah."

"You're giving your age away," Mike laughed, "current opinion in the office is that she stands in for Uma Thurman."

"Humm. Who is Uma Thurman? What's the other one look like?"

"Sophia?" Mike opened another folder and took out a ten by eight of Sophia Scott Devenish.

"Jesus H Christ," Wavell exclaimed, "this guy Scott sure knew how to pick em. Who is she standing in for?"

"Mediterranean type. Italian? Greek? Spanish? Penelope Cruz? Salma Hayek? Rachel Weisz? Dark and very sexy. Look at those eyes. Personally I think she's more like Penelope Cruz. Gentle face. Quatermain's daughter is very similar but a little more Middle Eastern, and physically smaller. I guess that comes from her Iranian mother. And the daughters are identical, identical, to their mothers."

"What is it about the rich? Why are they always so goddam beautiful

as well?"

"Well, the women were beautiful before they were rich, but the men are downright nondescript. You wouldn't notice them in the street. Anyway, Caroline Hannay also has a daughter by Scott. Lucinda Scott Hannay who has followed in mama's footsteps. An academic. She did a doctorate in astrophysics at Cambridge and is currently a post doctoral research fellow at the University of Keele."

"In Germany?" Wavell laughed again.

"No. Come on, don't kid me. You know perfectly well where Keele is. Used to have very strong American links. Bit like Reed or Swarthmore. That kind of thing. It's okay. A good university. One of those the Brits founded in the sixties. A lot better than St Deiniol's."

"Yeah, I know. Just kidding. I had a buddy at Reed who did an exchange with Keele in the sixties. He liked it a lot. How do you rate these guys. Scott and his women?"

"Well... they're very rich and very beautiful but they don't live like the super rich. They have a very, very, low profile. Very few people know about Scott's ownership of Trikos. Quatermain is the name that everyone associates with it. Like Branson and Virgin. But, unlike Branson, Quatermain doesn't exactly throw his money about. He's got this enormous motor yacht which is really just a floating office, and there are all the usual corporate baubles. But he's been more than a bit of a recluse since his first wife died. And that was over twenty years ago. Rarely comes off the yacht and when he does he often just vanishes. But Scott? I don't see that he has much input into Trikos. He seems to be a sleeping partner."

"Sleeping with his beautiful women probably. Okay, let's leave Scott for the time being. What about the main player? Quatermain?"

"Well. Quatermain used to have a very high profile. As I said, he's been more reclusive since his wife died. He's the son of a British Diplomat, Anthony Dominic Quatermain, and an American socialite. Amanda Rose Throckmorton."

"Are you related?" Wavell laughed.

"I wouldn't say so. She may have been my trillionth great cousin. But I've never met her and never knew I was related to her until I started this research on Quatermain."

"Well, you should be flattered. You belong to a family that was one of the first in America. Up there with the Lowells and Cabots. More on Quatermain please."

Mike pulled a wry face. Throckmorton was a common enough name, and being by training and inclination a scientist he had never been much

interested in the history of his family, not least because he had hated his father so much that he had moved heaven and earth to escape from him. He resumed his analysis of the mysterious owners of the Trigonikos Group.

“Educated in the US as a child but then went Eton. Did two years at St Deiniol’s then left to start Trikos. Hasn’t looked back since. He’s one smart cookie.”

“Family?”

“Initially married to Yasmine Nourpanah Allam. Daughter of an Iranian oil minister. Her family were murdered when the Shah was deposed in 1979. She died in childbirth in 1981. One surviving daughter of twins. Ayesha Yasmine Quatermain. Now married to Nikos Scott. If you thought the other two were stunning take a look at Ayesha.” Mike flicked another photograph at Wavell.

“See what you mean. Sort of miniature Sophia Loren.”

“You’re showing your age again. She’s very like Sophia and Imogen Devenish, but darker skin and more petite. Tiny really. More middle eastern than Mediterranean. But facially they’re all rather similar, even the blondes. Very delicate features. Elfin, almost. If you look at them from a certain angle. Anyway, Quatermain remarried in 2004 to Angela Ellmers. German super-model better known as Sonja. We all know what Sonja looks like. No children, but she’s in her fifties and also loaded in her own right. Well, the parents are all in their fifties. Wouldn’t think so to look at them.”

“Okay. What about the third director. Graves?”

“Well, initially there were three other main board directors. With the exception of Graves they were all at St Deiniol’s. Graves is also Eton, but went straight into the City. Well connected finance guy. Father was a very successful stockbroker. So, family footsteps too. There are two other directors, both women. Both from the same St Deiniol’s graduation year as the others. Janice Walton and Andrea Hanson. Economics graduates. Apparently known in the company as Tinkerbelle and Puck. Graves was married to Puck, Andrea Hanson, but something happened. The story is that Hanson and Walton are bisexual and wanted to be together and Graves couldn’t cut it. They got divorced and shortly afterwards Graves left the company. His shares were bought out for one billion dollars by Quatermain. That’s why Quatermain is currently the principal shareholder. Graves is at present living in L.A. writing pulp fiction for fun. He’s got a vast estate and ranch house in the hills behind Malibu. He’s the only one with a permanent domicile in the States, though they all have houses here. Walton is head of Trikos US

division. There is a small New York Office but the main US headquarters are in San Francisco. Walton is rarely in the US. Mostly she's either in Zurich, or on Quatermain's motor yacht. Hanson is head of Trikos Australasia but tends to stay close to Walton and Quatermain. Given modern telecommunications these guys can run things from anywhere in the world. They are also both super rich and pretty attractive too. Wanna see?"

Wavell took the photographs, looked at them briefly and returned them to Mike. "If I see any more of these ladies," he muttered, "I'll get a hard on. And I'm too old for that kind of thing."

"Well, funny you should say that. They all look very young don't they. The women."

"Yeah, but they're only in their fifties. That's nothing these days."

"Perhaps. I defy you to tell mothers and daughters apart. And look at the men. Look at Quatermain and Scott." Mike handed Wavell two more photographs, "how old would you say they look?"

"Early to mid thirties."

"Okay, this is Graves who was their contemporary. How old does he look?"

"Mid to late fifties," Wavell looked at the three photographs, "Hey...I see what you mean."

"He's a lot older isn't he. He looks his age."

"Maybe he's had a hard life."

"Maybe."

"So, is that all you've got?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm sorry boss. They keep themselves to themselves and they don't lead a super rich lifestyle. It's very difficult to find out anything about them which isn't already on the public record. I guess I haven't told you anything you didn't already know. These guys keep quiet, run their business and try not to rock boats. As I said, they're squeaky clean. Why are we looking at them?"

"I share your view. I really don't know why. But someone higher up wants them watched and the Corporate Intelligence Service is tasked by Homeland Security to keep an eye on big companies which have interests which might be vital, or damaging, to US interests. After Enron we don't take chances. And I suppose the wahabbis are not the only threat to Mr and Mrs America. Reclusive owners of great companies sometimes get megalomaniac ideas. Bottom line is I've had orders from above to investigate the people who run Trikos. So we had better at least go through the motions. And besides," Wavell paused as though debating what to say next, "besides," he concluded quietly, "I have a

personal interest in Trikos.”

“You watch too many James Bond movies,” Mike laughed.

“Well there is a sort of problem with Trikos,” Wavell replied, “in fact there are several problems. First off they are said to be working on stem cell technology. Because of Bush we’re way behind on that. Apparently Trikos has made some kind of breakthrough. But what it is has not yet been publicly revealed. That’s right within our purview. Second off, they are too goddam perfect. As I said, all businesses make mistakes and lose money. Trikos has never put a foot wrong. If I didn’t know better I’d say they can read the future. And if they can read the future I’d sure as hell like to know how. Trikos is goddam mysterious. Just look at their logo. An impossible isometric triangle straight out of Escher. An enigma wrapped up in an illusion. You ever wonder whether there are aliens amongst us? Remember that Walter Tevis novel, *The Man who Fell to Earth*? Maybe these people are not like us. Have you noticed how many Trikos products are based on ideas from sci fi novels? It’s a thought.” Wavell was now grinning even more mischievously. Mike guessed that he wasn’t expecting to be taken seriously.

“I happen to know that Drew Quatermain is an avid reader of Sci-Fi and has put up money for a number of Sci Fi films. He’s a big fan of Babylon 5.”

“Yup. *Nobody here is quite what they seem*. Too true. And third off. Quatermain is funding a great deal of academic research into astrophysics, genetics and nanotechnology. He’s also been running a mega project to catalogue and digitally store specimen genomes of every living species on the planet. He’s got teams out all over the world collecting DNA samples. He calls it project ARK. They’re also funding research into both DNA and Quantum computing. That’s called the Altair Project. I would personally very much like to know what the Altair project is. Especially who is actually working on it. Names.”

Wavell’s voice was subdued, almost wistful. He waited for a few moment as though lost in another world. “And then there’s his vacuum energy research. That’s goddam dangerous.” He paused again. “Anyway,” he said, “Trikos is not giving anything away on that front. On the other hand his latest tourism venture is underwater hotels. He’s building two of them. A huge complex off the coast of Iceland which is reputed to be complete. Why Iceland? Geothermal energy, maybe? And another one just starting construction off the island of Pantellaria in the Med. Interesting guy, don’t you think? He’s also bought two Russian nuclear submarines to supply and service the underwater hotels.

This stuff is straight out of James Bond. But, if you look at the whole picture, all of this diverse research could be made to fit together. It's convergent technology. So, what's he up to? Does he know something that we don't know? Calling a project ARK is pretty unsubtle. Maybe he thinks there is some global catastrophe coming and he's preparing a refuge of some kind. Maybe he is the global catastrophe."

"And maybe we're just a bit paranoid after 9/11. Maybe these really are just good guys doing clever stuff to make money. Very American. What do you want me to do?" Mike sat back in his chair and closed his files.

Wavell ran his fingers through his long white hair, then stroked his moustache.

"As you say, it's very difficult to get close to these people. Like all the super rich they have ways of keeping the curious at bay, be it paparazzi or spooks. And these guys have gone out of their way not to be noticed. You'll never get closer to Quatermain than a formal interview and I doubt if Scott will be anything other than a charming English gent. You can try talking to them but I guarantee they won't tell you anything, if you go through formal channels. It needs to be done informally which means we have to find some way to get close to them by the backdoor. I know part of what Trikos is up to. I'd like to know the rest but I mainly want to know more about these people. I think they are going to do something which will have cataclysmic consequences, and I don't think they've thought it through. I want to know what their motives are. And what kind of people they are. And whose side they're on. And, above all, I want to know whether Drew Quatermain has an agenda and what it is. Have you done any field work yet?"

Mike shook his head.

"Okay, this is a good place to start. First off. Go and see this guy Adrian Graves in Malibu. See what you can get out of him, Then, you did your doctoral degree in genetics in Cambridge England. Am I right?"

Mike nodded again.

"We've got you a research fellowship in a unit funded by Quatermain at Keele University, England. Yeah, I do know all about Keele. As you say, it's a good school. Find out what this unit is doing and use it as a cover to get to know the Hannay girl. She's the only one who doesn't have personal security. I guess no one takes academics seriously. So, seduce her and screw her if you want to. But for Christ's sake don't fall in love with her. Get her confidence and see if you can get yourself invited to meet her folks. Don't push anything. We're just watching.

Find out what makes these people tick. These are delicate and exotic creatures. We may need to protect them. From themselves and from others. Or we may need to arrest them.”

“Okay. I’ll arrange an interview with Graves in Malibu. That’s easy, most novelists like to talk to people. But I’ll need to be in England pretty soon. Their semesters start in late September.”

“Good,” Wavell relaxed in his chair, “I don’t really think this is a big deal but apparently the guys upstairs think we need to watch it. And someone has specifically asked for you to be assigned to this case.”

“Me?” Mike looked startled. “Who? Why?”

“The computer,” Wavell chuckled, “I guess our computers match agents to assignment. Probably because of your genetics qualifications. Or maybe your name! But I agree with the choice. You’re the right guy for this.”

“Okay, if you say so. Incidentally there are three other things about the Trikos people,” Mike added, almost as an afterthought, “they may not mean anything.”

“Go on.”

“They all left St Deiniol’s in 1973. There were no children until eight years later, and then they all came together. Scott’s children by Sophia and Caroline within a day of each other. Quatermain’s a month later. It’s almost as though they planned it. But by that time the women were in their late twenties early thirties. Why didn’t they have children earlier, and why have there been no more children?”

“Well, maybe they were having a good time and didn’t want children. Thirty something is a normal time to settle down. Plenty of career women here delay kids ‘til they’re in their thirties, and the rest. Nothing unusual about that. And, as I recall, Trikos did not really take off as a global player until the early eighties, on the back of Reagan free market economics. Maybe they just waited until they were really in the clover before having kids.”

“Yeah, possibly. I guess you’re right.”

“And the other things?”

“Well, not only did the three women all produce children at around the same time. All three also conceived twins, but only Sophia actually produced twins. Yasmine died in childbirth taking one twin with her. Caroline Hannay had two fertilised eggs, but only one came to term.”

“How in God’s name did you find that out?”

“The cause of death of Yasmine Quatermain is a matter of public record. It was in the press. For the others I hacked into the English health service database. It’s surprisingly comprehensive and surprisingly

insecure.”

“Interesting, but I don’t know why it is significant, and I’m amazed that they used the public health service when they could have gone privately.” Wavell pulled a sceptical face.

“Yasmine did go private, in Switzerland, and, ironically she didn’t survive it. But for the other two it’s entirely consistent with their general pattern of behaviour. They want to appear as ordinary as possible. Pretty goddam difficult, considering how they look. But think about it. This is a group of people who own companies that do research in genetic engineering. I just wondered...you know...whether they had experimented on themselves.”

“You don’t need genetic engineering to have twins. Hormone therapy will do that. And gene therapy was in its infancy in 1981. Hardly likely.”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Bit of a coincidence though.”

“Don’t get too imaginative. Keep your eyes on the target. The third thing?”

“Trikos has a very unusual recruitment policy. In addition to the usual procedures they require all applicants for jobs to undergo a DNA test. If you don’t agree to be tested they won’t consider you. Nobody knows why and it doesn’t seem to affect the outcome of the application, except that they recruit far more women than men. Also, Trikos employees are fanatically loyal to the company. I’ve tried talking casually to people from the New York office. I even bedded one of them. But they don’t give anything away. I learned nothing from them. Not many companies inspire that kind of loyalty. I just thought that it was curious.”

“Maybe they like women. They are the master race after all. As for the DNA tests. That isn’t unusual either. You were tested when you joined CIS. It’s a standard practice for all branches of the security services and the military. In case you get blown to bits or something.”

“That’s true. You too?”

Wavell sucked contemplatively on his empty pipe. “Er...no, actually. I took a rain check on that one. Just naturally contrary I guess. Don’t trust computers.” He looked up at the ceiling. “And anyway, who would want to blow me up?” he continued, after a long silence, “so, well done, you’ve already got more than I expected. You’re definitely the right guy for this job.”

Mike closed the door on the still chuckling Wavell and instructed his secretary to arrange an interview with Adrian Graves in Malibu. Two days later he was in the Topanga Canyon standing outside the security

gates which shielded the playboy Adrian Graves from the prying eyes of paparazzi, and requesting admittance from the guards to a palace of very exotic pleasures.

CHAPTER 3

Lucy opened her balcony shutters, stepped out into the already warm Greek air and looked down at the spacious, curved terrace built into the rocky peninsula which separated the two beaches. At one end there were steps leading down to the larger of the beaches which was the preserve of the 'textiles'. At the other end there was a sea water swimming pool built into the rocks. Beside it was a small patio area shaded by olive trees. In the middle of the patio was a black and white tiled chess board mounted on a concrete pedestal flanked by two decrepit wicker work chairs. Earlier in the week Lucy thought she had seen an old man there, apparently playing chess on his own, but she had not seen him again, either on the terrace or in the hotel.

The sound of a shower running drew her attention back to the textile beach end of the terrace where a large man with short red hair, a jovial face and a ridiculously colourful pair of Bermuda swimming shorts, was showering the salt water off his reddish skin after a pre-breakfast swim. Beside him was a more obviously Greek girl, olive skinned, oval faced and dark haired, who was patiently holding a towel for him. As he turned away from the shower the man looked up at the figure on the balcony and Lucy realised that she had come from her own morning shower without dressing. A week sunbathing on a nudist beach had made her careless. The man raised his hand in salute and smiled at her. Lucy blushed under her tan, but waved back and then retreated into her room.

Shortly afterward, now discreetly clad in a short denim skirt and a T shirt, Lucy joined the queue for the self service breakfast in the small hotel at Platis Yialos. Simone had not yet graduated to providing full board, but her family also owned one of the tavernas on the adjacent beach and a rather swish restaurant in Skiathos town, where her guests could dine at a small discount. An in-house breakfast was, however, an essential service, and the dining room was already filled with a babble of elderly Greek diners taking a late holiday after the August masses had returned to work. Lucy put a glass of fruit juice on her tray, avoided the slice of cake and the Melba toast which the Greeks substituted for proper English toast, and took instead a boiled egg, a roll, and a croissant with butter and honey. Although she was used to communal dining in the refectories in Cambridge, she was, like most English people, reluctant to impose herself on a table already occupied by strangers, especially strangers who were also Greeks. The Greeks, by

contrast, welcomed strangers and were always eager to talk to people from other countries, often about the most intimate things. She spotted an empty table on the other side of the room, but as she turned to make for it, a large decorative plate fell off a wall behind her and crashed in pieces on the floor. Lucy felt a sudden pain in her head, as though an invisible door had opened into her psyche and an unrecognised visitor had entered her consciousness. She shook her head and the sensation vanished except for a fading roar, like distant waves breaking on a darkling beach. All of the breakfasters turned round and looked, first at the missing plate, and then at Lucy, as though blaming her for the sudden interruption to their breakfast conversations. Lucy smiled at them sweetly and waved her free hand in an insouciant gesture.

“κορίτσι. καθίστε, σας παρακαλώ,” a voice said behind her.

Lucy turned round. It was the red headed man who she had seen earlier under the shower. She accepted his invitation and sat down in the vacant chair.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Ah,” the man said, “you are English, “but you understand Greek.”

“A little,” Lucy replied cautiously.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Yannis Hadjidaki. This is my wife Tzain. My friends, Seraphina Mandrakis and Akis Mandrakis, and my son Dimitri. Please join us. And what is your name?”

“Με λενε Lucy. Lucinda.....Hannay.”

“Bravo. But we will speak in English. We all understand English and it is good for us to practice.”

Lucy looked round the table at her new companions. Yannis and his wife were early middle aged. Akis was younger, though his hair was already greying, and his wife was much younger, in her late twenties probably, with long straight, jet black hair and penetrating ice blue eyes. Dimitri was a rather handsome mid teenage boy with dark curly hair, a little like her own half brother Nikos, who was at least a quarter Greek because his mother Sophie was half Greek.

“And what do you do in England, Lucy?” Seraphina enquired, speaking with a subdued American accent.

“I’m a post doctoral student,” Lucy replied.

“In what subject and what university?” Yannis asked, “I was myself at Cambridge for three years. I have a degree in economics.”

“Oh,” Lucy replied, “I was at Cambridge. Which college were you at?”

“Queen’s. And you?”

“King’s. And I’m studying astrophysics.”

“Astrophysics?” Seraphina exclaimed, but not with the same sense of awe that Simone had exhibited two days before, “so interesting.” She definitely spoke with an American accent. Maybe a Greek educated in the States, Lucy thought. Seraphina looked at Lucy more closely, as though she had suddenly recognised something, “and you are enjoying your holiday?”

“You are going to the Little Banana beach,” Yannis laughed. “I have seen you there. I thought you were German. So many blondes. I like to swim in the nude. Dimitri and I go. We go to hunt octopodi. But Tzain will not go there. Tzain thinks that God can see her and will not approve.”

Tzain blushed under her tan and looked embarrassed.

“But,” Yannis continued, “I disagree. I think that God loves us most when we are as naked as the first man and woman that he ever created.”

Lucy smiled and diverted herself by cracking her boiled egg.

“Akis is in computers,” said Dimitri, suddenly plucking up courage to speak in a language which was less familiar to him than it was for his parents, “in Athens. He has factory. And Seraphina is American. Seraphina is research in computing. She is working for American company.”

Akis nodded but said nothing. Lucy felt an extraordinary sense of community with them, as though she had always known them.

“And are you well paid, in your job?” Yannis asked, “how much do you earn? For astrophysics.”

“Not really.”

“How much?”

“Thirty thousand pounds. I think,” Lucy replied with some uncertainty since her academic salary was a minor element in her regular income.

“Not so much. Why do the English pay their cleverest people so little?” Tzain grimaced, “here yes. Badly paid. But Greece is poor country. But England. Rich country.”

“Greece is not a poor country,” said Akis in perfect English, “Greece is rich, but the money is in the hands of a few and they spend it outside Greece. Salarieds always suffer. They cannot avoid taxes. The rich,” he shrugged, “they have their ways. We have our ways.” He grinned conspiratorially.

“We have to survive in a hard world,” said Yannis, “Greeks are very good at surviving. Are you here for more days?”

“Two or three days. Probably leave on Wednesday.”

Yannis looked puzzled. “You will fly, of course. But there are few planes to England on Wednesday. The English always come and go at

the weekends.”

“Have you all come from Athens?” Lucy asked, “how did you get here? Did you fly?”

“We could do. Actually, we came by boat, from Euboea. Yannis has a house on Euboea. It’s only a short journey in a rib,” Akis said.

“We have a big rib,” said Dimitri excitedly, “it’s anchored down there,” he gestured at the beach, “two Tohatsu 90 direct injection drives. Can go at sixty knots. Sweet.”

“Dimitri likes speed,” said Yannis, “the young must always go fast. We come here every year, like this, just for a couple of days. We have a friend on the island and this is a nice hotel. Greek. No mass tourists. Hah, excuse me. I do not count you as a tourist since to be in this hotel you must be travelling independently. But I’m curious. There are no planes to England on Wednesdays.”

Lucy shook her head. The Greek habit of persistent questioning had probably unlocked the first secrets of the universe, but sometimes it could be a little too intrusive. “I am travelling independently.” Caution forbid Lucy to mention the family summer house on adjacent Alonissos, “but I came by boat. By yacht. My parents left me here.”

“You were a naughty girl?” Akis laughed.

“No, of course not,” Lucy laughed back, “I just rather fancied a few days here on my own. They’re taking the yacht back to Lavrion.”

“A charter yacht?” Dimitri asked. Lucy shook her head but did not elaborate.

“What class of yacht?” Dimitri persisted.

“I think it’s called a Southerly 45.”

“Wicked,” Dimitri got even more excited, “a motor sailer. And lifting keel. Really sweet.”

“Ah, so you will take the small plane to Athens airport,” Yannis probed.

Lucy nodded. Yannis meant the daily Olympic shuttle, but Lucy was not going to tell him what was actually planned.

“And what are your plans for today. On Skiathos, nothing but beaches. Do you have a car?”

Lucy nodded again, “I’ve rented a Suzuki 4 x 4, but there’s nothing much to see here. I’ll probably go back to the beach.”

“Ah, yes, you need a jeep here. Kastro is interesting. But the roads are bad in the mountains. Tell me, we are meeting our friend for dinner. He is an academic too. Professor Thanatakis. A professor of palaeanthropology. He is a most interesting man. Would you like to join us? It is not proper for such a beautiful woman to dine on her own.”

There was no way of getting out of it, and anyway Lucy was becoming rather tired of eating on her own. The idea of having someone to talk to was seductive, and educated Greeks were always a good bet for interesting conversation. She agreed, wilfully overruling parental advice never to go off with people she didn't know. It would not be the first time. But she felt safe with these people, as though they were somehow old friends. Her father had kept his family out of the limelight, so that they were not publicly known or associated with Trikos. Poor Yesha had been brought up in the full glare of Drew's fortune and her face and figure were well known to the paparazzi, and to others who did not wish Trikos well. Ayesha had to be very careful who her friends were. Marrying Nikos had allowed her to escape into the relative anonymity of her husband's family, but there was no guaranteed cloak of invisibility. Lucy, by contrast, enjoyed the advantages of anonymity, or so she thought.

“Ενδοχεί. Απόψε. Περίπου οκτώ η ώρα. Εδώ.” Yannis smiled and looked expectantly at her, unsure whether or not she had understood.

“Βεβαίως,” Lucy replied.

“Bravo. You understand Greek well. So eight o'clock, outside the hotel. A jeep will come for us, but it will be crowded with six people. Perhaps some of us can come with you? So you do not get lost. It is in the mountains. There are many, how do you say, tracks. Easy to get lost.”

“Of course,” Lucy was not surprised. The Greeks are wonderful opportunists.

“Excellent,” said Yannis, “tonight then.”

After breakfast Lucy returned to her room and, after a brief period sitting on the balcony reading more of *Scholars and Gentlemen* in order to give her new found friends time to go to wherever they were going, she took herself off to the liberating nudity of the Little Banana beach, taking *Scholars* with her.

There were far fewer people on the beach than yesterday. It was September and the season was drawing to a close. The present naked clientele were older, some English, but mostly German. Late holiday makers, and retired people indulging youthful dreams. Most of the sun beds on either side of Lucy were empty. There was a rather elderly man on a bed behind her, deep in a German edition of James's Gleick's book on Chaos, familiar to Lucy from her own interests. To her left, about thirty yards away, were a younger couple, a man lying on his side with his back towards Lucy so that all she could see was short cropped grey hair, sturdy legs and small tight bottom. Standing beside him was a

strikingly beautiful woman. Lucy had begun to appreciate that some of the people here were occasional public nudists, like herself, whilst for others it was a way of life in which carefully manicured bodies were an art form in themselves, to be posed and displayed to other connoisseurs. This woman was standing with her legs slightly apart so that she could show off her perfectly formed and totally hairless vagina, the narrow symmetrical teardrop of the closed labia minora with the thin clitoral hood clearly visible at the top of the cleft. It was, Lucy, thought, quite beautiful.

She looked away, lay back on her bed and concentrated on the sky to divert her mind from the erotic thoughts which were seeping into it. Wispy clouds were forming. The weather was changing. It would soon be time to go. Imogen's soft and gentle darkness floated into her consciousness.

"What are you doing?" Imogen thought at her.

"Just lying here,"

"Let me see what you can see. I can only see the sky."

Lucy turned onto her side and looked down the beach at the woman who was still standing, legs apart, hands on hips, eyes shaded by large sunglasses which effectively concealed her face, long straight dark hair blowing in the slight afternoon wind. She was looking in Lucy's direction, but because of the sunglasses Lucy could not tell exactly where she was looking.

"Oh gosh. Are you horny or what?"

"I'm trying not to think about it,"

"Think about me then," Imogen's naked body curled itself around Lucy's libido.

"Stop it. Imogen, stop it, stop it, oh gosh, stop it, oh, oh, God, Imogen, stop it." Lucy found herself panting and moaning. She struggled to suppress the irresistible orgasm, gripped the edges of the sun bed tightly and tried to stop the involuntary spasms which racked her body. All her senses were now tuned to Imogen's consciousness and she could feel Imogen's own orgasm surging through her. Then it was gone.

"Oh, Christ, Imogen I wish you wouldn't do that!"

"Why not? It's lovely, I do love you."

"Because I'm on a beach surrounded by naked people who are looking at me as though I've got ants in my pants, except I'm not wearing any pants."

"Neither am I. I'm on my own on the boat. Mum and dad have gone into Porto Rafti for something. I just felt like a quick shag."

"Well, go and find a bloody Greek waiter then. For Christ's sake what is the matter with this family. We're obsessed with sex. All of us."

"Oh please Lucy, please don't lose your temper, please. I only wanted to be with you. I do miss you."

"I know. I miss you too." Two naked men, gays from the other end of the beach, promenaded past her. They were handsome, athletic, well built, well endowed and well hung.

"What a waste," Imogen thought.

"Some people might say that we are wasted. That we should have men," Lucy thought back.

"We can have both. I pity those who are stuck with only one sexuality. We're very lucky. Anyway, Nikos is trying to find a man for us. Are we going to his party? We can't let Yesha shag all these strangers for us."

"No, not this one. He's putting it off for a month. I wasn't going to go, but I've changed my mind. And we're not lucky! We're bloody unlucky. We're stuck with this stupid telepathy thing. Why won't mum and dad tell us why? They know, but they block us out. We can get almost anywhere in their minds without them knowing. But they won't tell us what that dream meant. You remember. The Trojan woman being raped and the witch being burned alive. We know we all have these dreams. But they're not dreams are they. They're real memories of something that happened to us in another life. How can that be? And what the hell does it mean?"

"I don't know," Imogen's emotions were regretful, "don't worry about it sweetheart, they'll tell us. When we're ready. And I think they know when we go into their minds. I think they mostly let us go where we want. Like we can with Nikos and Yesha, when they let us. So we know what it's like when they make love to each other and it's not like what we feel when we make love to ordinary men is it. It's different. It's like what it was between us just now, but much more intense. All in the mind. It's lovely. I do envy mum and Yesha and your mum. It's so beautiful. I wish we could find a man who could love us like our parents and Nikos and Yesha love each other."

"You're too soft Imogen, you're like your mother. My mother is harder. She always wants answers and so do I. And she knows the answers and she won't tell us. I'm going now. I'll see you on Wednesday."

Lucy leapt off the sunbed as though she had been stung by a bee, ran wildly through the shallows at the edge of the beach and dived energetically into the quim quenching embrace of the gentle waves. The tall woman watched the slim athletic body disappear under the water, then took off her sunglasses and lay down on her stomach beside her companion.

Lucy stretched out her arms and legs and floated in the milk warm water. She put her head back, gazed at the cloud dappled blue sky and allowed her consciousness to float away on a mirror calm ocean in which complex arrays of prime numbers sang of chaotic improbabilities.

“Different ends of the spectrum I think. Astrophysics and palaeanthropology,” Lucy said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Professor Thanatakis replied, “you study events which happened billions of year ago, do you not? I merely study events which happened a few million years ago. I’m quite modern I think.”

Professor Theodore Thanatakis seemed unbelievably old and looked a little like Gandalf, white haired, but with a bushy Einstein moustache rather than a wizard’s beard. His house was perched just above the edge of a small beach nestling between two dark valleys. In front of them was the sea and the more desolate darkness of the north coast of Skiathos. In the daytime the little shingle cove above which the house had been miraculously built was washed by the most amazing opal blue sea. Every morning, when the weather was clement, the professor would make his way to the beach and swim in the magical water. No one else came here, except for the occasional rented speedboat. It was too shallow and too small for the tourist boats, and the sandy beaches of the south coast were thought to be much more attractive.

Lucy could not see any of this. They had arrived after dark along an unmade track which had almost defeated the little Suzuki jeep. The excited Dimitri sat beside her to show her the way and Lucy struggled to follow the path of the jeep in front of her as it twisted round the jagged rocks and half exposed boulders which stuck out of the track like the crushed teeth of ancient dragons, ground down by the millstones of time, before plunging down a vertiginous track to the ramshackled wooden house. Now they sat around an equally ramshackled table covered with a chequerboard oilcloth and set out with a wide range of mezzes, most of which had now been eaten, along with several bottles of Boutari and retsina.

“What are you actually studying?” Akis asked.

“I’m interested in Dark Energy.”

“Dark Energy?” Dimitri exclaimed. “Is like Dark Matter? I have heard of Dark Matter. Like in the Dust in *His Dark Materials*. Cool book. I have read it twice. So much better than Harry Potter. How you say....intelligent book. Not for kids only.”

“Yes, I agree,” Lucy replied in her most academic voice. These Greeks were well educated and fluent in English, even the young

Dimitri. “Brilliant book, but I don’t think he’s talking about quite the same thing. Essentially the problem is that we can estimate the total mass of the universe, but only about four percent of it is actually visible and measurable. That is the things we can see, the stars, solid things like this table, rocks and stones and trees and our bodies. The worlds we live in. But we now think that around twenty six percent of the rest is made up of Dark Matter and the remaining seventy percent is Dark Energy. We know that these Dark forces are there because we can calculate them, but so far we haven’t found any reliable method for determining what they really are. I’m working on the Dark Energy. It’s sometimes called Vacuum, Energy. Depends which circles you move in.”

“So, it’s really just a mathematical hypothesis?” Professor Thanatakis stroked his moustache. The image of an ancient wizard with a high pointed cap, and a magical staff which could cast potent spells was compelling. No, Lucy thought, he was more like Prospero, wise, and sad. But there was no obvious daughter, no Miranda. The professor looked at Lucy and raised his eyebrows.

“Seraphina can be my daughter though she’s really my mother,” he said enigmatically, “is it just a mathematical construct, then? Just another mind experiment?”

Precognition was not new to Lucy, but she was unused to having her mind read by a man, other than her fathers and her half brother. Surprisingly, since men with this gift were unbelievably rare, she did not question it.

“Well, not exactly,” she replied, “we do have the Chandra X ray facility. We have Spectrography and the UKIRT infra red telescope. We’re close to imaging it. But we don’t really know what it is.”

“Very difficult to prove the existence of something that may not exist, like God, for example.” He paused and fixed Lucy with dead eyes that lanced through her soul, “Who are you?” he asked, “give me your hand.”

Lucy reluctantly stretched her hand over the table towards the wizened hand held out to her. As the fingers met she yelped with surprise and fell back in her chair as though she had received an electric shock. The sensation was familiar, though it usually travelled in the other direction, from a strong soul to a weaker one, as it had with Simone. For an imperceptible nanosecond she felt her entire body being scanned by a psychic force unlike anything she had ever encountered before. Not just her consciousness but everything was scanned down to the last molecule of her being; to the last strand of her DNA; to the last spectral quark flitting between one dimension and the next. Lucy was being read and recorded. Then it was gone. Thanatakis relaxed his grip,

leaned back in his chair and look at her intently.

“Dark Energy?” he smiled, “tell me what you think Dark Energy is. Take your time.”

“I thought I knew. Now I’m not so sure,” Lucy said, trying to make sense of the bizarre images which had flooded into her mind when Thanatakis had touched her fingers.

“Well, try anyway,” said Seraphina. Yannis and Tzain looked on quietly. Lucy sensed that their powers were not as developed as the others. Like her own parents, they had discovered something which they did not understand and had been drawn into this circle by fate. They too were struggling with the inexplicable. And there was something else, a separate presence pervaded the dark room, like the presence she had so often felt in the corridors of Croxton Hall. The guardian angel which watched over them. She paused, trying to make sense of an encounter which was slowly mutating into the multi layered plasticity of an unfolding dream.

“Well, ultimately it grows out of Quantum Electro Dynamics. There are two current theories,” Lucy began. The first is the Cosmological Constant which suggests that space is invested with some fundamental form of energy, usually called Lambda, but sometimes known as the vacuum or dark energy, predicted by general relativity theory.”

“So a vacuum is not actually empty?” Yannis questioned.

“No. In theory it would be possible for particles to arise spontaneously from the vacuum, so long as they disappeared before violating the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. Virtual particles, matter/antimatter pairs, are constantly being created in space but instantly annihilate each other creating energy which has potential mass. Also, the cosmological constant has a negative pressure equal to its energy density which is thought to counteract the force of gravity. That’s why the universe is expanding. Dark energy is the opposite of gravity. It is driving the matter in the universe apart.”

“And is this theory widely accepted?” Akis asked eventually.

“There is a problem about amplitude,” Lucy took a deep breath. She could talk about these things with colleagues who understood. It was much harder to explain to people who were not cosmologists or mathematicians. “If you apply quantum field theories which work with known matter the predicted cosmological constant from the energy of the quantum vacuum is massively too large. There is no obvious means of balancing this. Either there is another form of energy which coexists with the cosmological constant and balances it, such as gravity, or there is a massive and inexplicable imbalance. One possible explanation is that what we see with our senses is only a small part of a much larger and

much more complex universe to which we do not have access. Dark energy is our current explanation. Do you want to hear the other theory? The theory of Quintessence?"

"Yes."

"There is even less evidence. Quintessence is underpinned by string theory and revolves around the excitation of particles in an as yet unidentified dynamic field. But in the end it has the same problem as the Cosmological Constant because the scalar fields predicted by string theory would acquire unacceptably large masses which ought to be detectable but cannot be detected. That's enough, I think."

"You are tired?" Thanatakis murmured.

"Yes,"

"But there are not answers? You don't want to talk about Implicate Order?" Seraphina took up the frayed thread of an unravelling conversation.

"David Bohm? It's a variant on Quintessence and it does not have wide acceptance. Bohm believed that the universe has an underlying order which he called the Implicate Order. Implicate Order provides a template for the physical universe which he called the Explicate Order. So what we can see of the physical universe is only a distorted reflection of what is actually there. Think of it as being like that game you play folding up newspaper then cutting random shapes in it with a pair of scissors. When it's folded it does not appear to have any ordered pattern. But when you unfold it the implicate pattern becomes apparent. It's an interesting theory but it also implies some element of determinism which could be construed as intelligent design," Lucy suddenly felt extremely tired, either from the food, or the wine, or the intoxicating mystery which surrounded her.

"I think Plato got there before Bohm," Seraphina said quietly, "but what do you think about Garrett Lisi and the E_8 theory?"

Lucy shrugged, "a viable unified field is the holy grail of physics. But Lisi is bizarre. Nevertheless the Large Hadron Collider did find the fundamental particles he predicted. And the theory is very simple, by mathematical standards. But.....I don't really know. It needs further experimental proof."

"You have everything you need to know," Seraphina said quietly, "all you must do is put it together."

Thanatakis sat back at the head of the simple table. The night was cool and refreshing. In the distance Lucy could see the lights of a ship, a ferry perhaps, *en route* from Thessalonika to Volos via Skiathos. From here the lights moved so slowly that they almost seemed to be standing still, but on the ship itself the hardy deck passengers braced themselves

against the blast of wind from the ship's headlong dash towards its destination. This was a fast ship. They would be docking soon.

"Tell us about the Goldilocks enigma," Seraphina continued..

"The Goldilocks enigma?" Lucy replied, trying to reconcile this sudden shift of perspective with the trend of the preceding argument.

"Yes," said Thanatakis, "tell us about the Goldilocks enigma."

"Some people try to explain the nature of the universe by using what is known as the anthropic principle."

"Which is?" Thanatakis continued to probe.

"The argument is that our universe is just right for us. It is uniquely hospitable to biological life. Like Goldilocks. Three bowls of porridge, but only one bowl is just right. Only very minor changes in the strength of the energies governing the universe, from the energy states of the electron to the exact strength of the weak nuclear force, would prevent the evolution of carbon based life forms. The fact that we exist at all is an extraordinary coincidence of favourable circumstances. The probability of such a coincidence of crucial variables is very small. We are here because we are meant to be here. Either the universe made us, or we made the universe. Or ours is just one of many parallel universes in which other rules apply. This is not a popular view with rationalists like Richard Dawkins because it again tends to suggest intelligent design."

"I know of these arguments," Thanatakis replied, "but perhaps life is just an accident. Not part of the proper purpose of the universe. Like rats in a sewer. They live there, but it was not built for them."

"I haven't really thought about that."

"Do you know why you are like this?" Thanatakis asked eventually.

"Like what?" Lucy was getting more and more tired and not a little irritable at this one sided Socratic dialogue.

"You have these psychic powers. You can read minds." Thanatakis looked at her with emotionless eyes, "you have a destiny which is not human."

Lucy shook her head, "my mother has theories, but she is a rationalist, like me, and so does not believe in anything. My half brother's father in law believes that the universe is conscious and intelligent and that our consciousness comes from it. That is why I'm studying Dark Energy. He says we are the eyes and ears of the universe and that we are special because it gives us something special. And when we make love our souls are momentarily released from our bodies and reunited with the cosmic consciousness. He thinks that the cosmic consciousness is a form of energy that stores the memory of all our past lives. Dark Energy is a form of intelligence. Aware of itself and of us.

He thinks.”

“Ah yes, *ekstasis. La petite morte*. The little death. But you don’t believe that.”

“I cannot deny that I have some kind of ESP ability. I can read peoples’ minds, as you can, and I can communicate telepathically with my siblings, and my parents. We are much better at it than they are. But I have never made love to a man who released my soul. We have never found such a man, though my parents say that they can do it and we know that they can because as children we used to eavesdrop on their minds when they made love. And my half brother and his wife sometimes let us share their lovemaking. It is beautiful. But it is also irrational. It doesn’t make any sense. As for Dark Energy being a form of sentient intelligence; we have no proof.”

“Us?”

“My half sister, Imogen.”

“Ah yes, Imogen, the innocent one, the maiden. Your parents named you well Lucinda, child of the light. And your parents know the answers but they have not told you, and therefore I cannot see them in your consciousness. Their minds are closed on this matter. Until you are old enough. But you are thinking of a book. By a friend of your family. A novelist. You think that the answers are in this book but you should not know them. Until you can control your temper. You have the book?”

“It’s in the hotel.”

“Perhaps you could lend it to Seraphina.” The voice was harsher, more insistent.

Lucy shook her head. “I haven’t finished reading it,” she said.

“It is said,” Seraphina murmured, “that one should fear Greeks who bring gifts because they always want something in return. We will give you a gift but in return we would like to see the book.”

“I cannot give it to you,” said Lucy, anxious now to discover just what was in *Scholars and Gentlemen* that she was not supposed to find out. She was about half way through a big and complex novel but had so far not learned anything that she did not already know.

“Have you ever considered,” Thanatakis said, changing direction yet again, “how strange it is that *homo sapiens* is the only surviving species of human, and how many species there are of other *genera*. Birds, dogs, cats, or apes for example, our lineal ancestors. Humans have been evolving for over six million years. *Homo habilis* for two million years, maybe, then *homo erectus*, for over a million years, here in Europe *homo ergaster* seven hundred thousand years ago. Then *Homo sapiens neanderthalis* for two hundred thousand years, an evolutionary dead end. Then *homo sapiens sapiens* for only one hundred and thirty thousand

years. But only modern humans have survived. There are different races, but they are all genetically *homo sapiens sapiens*. There should have been some adaptive radiation, an evolutionary tree, as there is in other species. But the evolutionary tree of modern man has few branches and those that we know of had no future. Except for modern man. Where are the others? Did *homo sapiens sapiens* kill them all? Or was there some disaster? An ice age perhaps, or some cosmic catastrophe that wiped them out? And, if so, why did only *homo sapiens sapiens* survive? Or perhaps some of them did survive and interbred with *homo sapiens sapiens* so now we can't tell them apart. But genetically they might be different. Don't you think."

"Is this your field?" Lucy asked.

"It was my field. Before I died. Did you know that the Russians have just discovered the remains of a bipedal female hominid over three million years old. The oldest known example of an early hominid."

"This is the one in Africa? The Tourmai find?" Lucy seemed to be the only one asking questions. The others sat silently, fading into the shadows flickering around them from the guttering candles on the chequered table, their faces barely visible. When she looked up again they had vanished, leaving her all alone in the dark, except for Seraphina who morphed effortlessly into Professor Thanatakis. The entity faced Lucy across the oilcloth chess board.

"No," Thanatakis replied, "not Africa. This one is in Siberia. You know that the permafrost is melting and some most interesting things are emerging from it. The earth is about to die and the ancient dead are rising from their graves to be judged. How ironic, don't you think. This one has a nearly flat face. A modern face. And it is not a fossil. It is a perfectly preserved skeleton, even with traces of body tissues and brain cells. Fascinating."

Lucy looked askance at him.

"You don't believe do you?" Thanatakis murmured.

"No. Not if the story comes from Russia."

"Don't ever underestimate the Russians. If it is true it turns current theories of human origins on their head. We have always assumed that all modern humans came out of Africa. Perhaps it is not so. Or perhaps some left Africa much earlier than we thought. Or perhaps.... It would be interesting to have a sample of its DNA, don't you think. If it were available. But never mind. You are very tired, aren't you. So very tired. Perhaps you had better stay the night here. It is too late for you to go back to Platis Yialos."

It was true. Lucy felt extremely and inexplicably tired. Avoiding the drive back to the hotel seemed like a good idea. She accepted the little

bed in an small and unfurnished room, and fell asleep almost instantly.

Thanatakis was standing by the bed. Only it wasn't Thanatakis. It was a young man, strong and handsome. She looked up at the shadowy figure and recognised him from another dream. She pulled the single sheet round her naked body. He sat down on the bed beside her and kissed her.

"You remember me," Thanatakis whispered. Lucy said nothing. "You once gave me a gift of life. In another life. Now I have a gift for you. A gift of death. Use it well."

Lucy shivered in the blazing heat of a forgotten sun. She was standing on the edge of an escarpment, at the top of a squat limestone cliff bisected by a trickling waterfall. Next to her was a faceless man, tall, naked, with the body of Greek god, broad shouldered, slim hiped and muscular, like the six packed pectoral heroes depicted on the front covers of trashy fantasy fiction. She was holding his right hand and looking out across a great plain; a vast heat shimmered woodland savannah extending far into the distance. On the other side of the man was Imogen, holding his other hand, silent and bewitched. Below them, near the base of the cliffs was a group of hominids, also naked, human in form but not quite human, gathered round the corpse of a woolly rhinoceros which they were butchering with knapped flint knives.

Some distance from the butchers stood three young men holding flint tipped spears, and six females, warily watching a pack of hyenas circling the campsite, looking for an opportunity to scavenge the remains of the rhino. Their skins were smooth and golden bronze brown. Straight ebony black hair cascaded down their short backs almost to their buttocks. Their legs were long and muscular, the legs of athletes, of creatures who could run fast over great distances. Unlike the creatures who were butchering the rhino these elegant bodies were indistinguishable from modern humans, comparable perhaps with sub continent Indians. Dark skinned and fine featured. They reminded Lucy of pictures she had once seen of naked Masai warriors, or statues of ancient Greek athletes, long legged and fleet footed. They were not the same species as their hominid companions.

Her dreams had often taken her back to the past. But never as far back as this. She knew instinctively that she was watching a scene from the remotest past, long before the evolution of modern humans. Far, far back, to the very beginning of the hominid era. And what she was seeing was wrong. It could not possibly be.

The hyenas suddenly scattered, cowed by a superior presence. Out of the long grass padded a sleek and massive sabre toothed tiger, larger than any tiger she had ever seen. The simian butchers turned from their

work and looked first at the tiger and then at the Others who had spread out to form a semicircle between them and the advancing predator. She could feel their thoughts. All of them, both the primitive hominids and these elegant hunters. There was no fear. Only expectation. Lucy looked up at the god like creature standing next her. He squeezed her hand. She was no longer on the cliff. She looked hesitantly at her family standing silently in a semicircle to her left and her right. Her father, her mothers, Drew, Sonja, Imogen, Amethyst, Nikos, Ayesha, Seraphina, Nikos, and, next to her, the undiscovered God. They were all here. All of the people closest to her were here. She felt the force of their subtle energy flow through her and knew that she must do what they willed her to do. She walked directly towards the tiger which quickened its pace. Then she stood stock still, her heart racing with fear and expectation, waiting for the tiger to launch itself at her.

The tiger did not hesitate. In the last instant of its lethal leap she looked into its expressionless eyes, felt the stench of its deadly breath on her cheek and, in the moment before its extended claws bit into her shoulders and its teeth closed around her head the imminence of death galvanised her psyche. The numbers resonating in her head coalesced into a single key which sang to her soul in an unforgettable harmony. Every atom in her body flipped out of the material world, converting her into sentient energy which leapt past the tiger and reassembled itself twelve paces behind it. The tiger's jaws closed on empty space. It collapsed onto the ground in a heap, shook itself and turned round to look for its vanished prey.

The butchers were leaping up and down, pummelling the air with hairy fists and shrieking in delight like the demented chimpanzees that they were. It was a game they had watched many times before. A game which the tiger rarely won. But they knew that if they were to try to play the same game themselves they would always lose. Lucy evaded the tiger several times, until it got tired and slunk off back into the grass to wait for the apes and their clever friends to abandon the dismembered rhino.

"You understand what you must do?" Thanatakis asked in the dark room. Lucy nodded.

"And now you can sleep." The entity that was Thanatakis caressed her face gently then kissed her on the lips, equally gently. "Forget this dream. Use my gift to you, but only when you have to. You will need it for the storm which is coming. Then you must share it with the others. You cannot use it alone. You must have the partner who gives you strength. And you must be willing to look death in the eye. Death is the key to life. You are the key. You understand?"

"You can see the future," Lucy sighed.

"No. I can see only the past. The future is merely an infinity of unwoven probabilities. I can see only what is probable."

"Who are you?" Lucy was beginning to sink, weighed down by time and by the insistent numbers furiously aligning themselves into new harmonies which crystallised into one unique melody. The numbers sang to her, and they sang a song of eternal life.

"I am just a dream. Now you must wake, or die!"

Seraphina shook Lucy urgently by the shoulders. "Wake up. Whoever you are. Wake up! This a dream! You are in my dream. Wake up!"

Lucy struggled for air. She was drowning. Above her she could see the dappled patterns of the sunlight on the water. But she was drowning. She fought to free herself from the invisible bonds which dragged her down. She tried to force herself up towards the surface but the dead weight of eternity crushed the life out of her lungs. She could not breathe. Fear and panic engulfed her. The universe faded into a familiar white wasteland half remembered from a thousand lives and a thousand deaths. The white went out. In the terror of the silent darkness Lucy invoked those melodious numbers and willed her body to dissolve into its ultimate components, transforming itself from matter into energy and from energy back into matter.

The incorporeal universe twisted in on itself and hurled Lucy back into life. She was on the beach, face down in the soft sand between the water's edge and the serried ranks of empty sun loungers. She raised herself on her elbows and retched up the salt water from her lungs. Then she rolled onto her back and looked at the couple kneeling beside her. The woman had taken off her dark sun glasses. Without them she was instantly recognisable.

"Are you okay?" Seraphina said gently, "do you want to go to the health centre?"

Lucy shook her head.

"You're sure? I think you nearly drowned," Seraphina persisted. Akis was kneeling on the other side of Lucy, holding her hand.

"You fell asleep in the sea, I think," he said, "it is easy done in the sun."

"No, no. I'm okay," Lucy replied, recovering her composure, "thank you, thank you, for rescuing me," she whispered and for no apparent reason she began to cry. Seraphina put her arms round Lucy and hugged her. Lucy sobbed quietly against her breasts. Seraphina stroked her wet hair and whispered to her but Lucy could not make out what she was saying. After a while the sobs subsided. Seraphina relaxed her grip. She took Lucy's face between her hands and kissed her on the lips. Lucy

felt an irresistible ethereal calm. The kiss lingered, not passionate, but probing. The kiss of a sister who was also a lover. Then the two pairs of lips parted, each both giving and taking something from the other.

"I think I'd better go back to the hotel," Lucy whispered eventually, "I think it would be better."

"Would you like us to come with you?" Seraphina asked.

Lucy shook her head again. "No, I'll be okay. Really. I'll be okay." She stood up, shakily, with Akis and Seraphina supporting her on either side.

"My sarong," Lucy whispered, trying to brush off the sand which clothed her wet body.

"Ah yes," Akis walked the short distance to Lucy's vacant sun lounger and retrieved the sarong. Lucy wrapped it round herself and made her way slowly back to the hotel. Simone looked at her suspiciously. She did not like guests who brought so much sand into the hotel. But there was another message for Lucy at the desk. Simone handed it to her without a word. It was a scribbled note from Yannis Hadjidaki. The trip planned for the evening was off. Professor Thanatakis, the palaeanthropologist, had died suddenly this morning whilst swimming from his private beach.

The hotel room was still, cool and dark. Lucy stood under the lukewarm shower, rinsed away the clinging sand, ran her hands through her matted hair, then felt every part of her body as though to confirm that she was still alive. Breasts, thighs, legs, face, everything was as it should be. When the shower was finished she brushed her hair then wrapped a towel round herself, opened the shutters and stood on the balcony. There were people lounging in the deck chairs on the hotel terrace below her. There were people on the beach. Speedboats. A paraglider and the big red rib moored at the hotel's little jetty. Nothing had changed.

She went back into the room, got dressed, then sat on the edge of the bed and tried to take stock of what had happened. None of it made sense. The vivid interlocking dreams, so real that they could not have been imagined, now slipped through her fingers like fine sand.

A distant echo resonated in her memory. She looked for the copy of *Scholars and Gentlemen* on the little table beside the bed. It was no longer there. She looked in her bag, under the bed, in the wardrobe. Everywhere. The book had disappeared. Then she remembered taking it to the beach. She must have left it on the beach. She would go back and look for it later, but in her heart she knew that she would not find it. She'd have to apologise to James Sinclair for losing it. Whatever

secrets it held would be denied to her, at least for the time being. There was a tentative knock on the door.

"Come in," Lucy said, "εισάγετε".

Seraphina came into the bedroom, dressed now in unflatteringly baggy cargo pants and an oversized green T shirt.

"You okay now?" she asked.

"Yes," Lucy replied, "only I've left my book on the beach. Did you see it?"

Seraphina shook her head. "No, guess not. Was it important?"

"Suppose not," Lucy said reluctantly, "I might go back and look for it later."

"You heard about Professor Thanatakis?"

"Yes. Yannis left a note."

"Yeah, sad day," Seraphina continued, "I was looking forward to meeting him."

"Was he old?" Lucy asked.

"Sure. I guess. Listen. Yannis is upset about the Professor. He doesn't feel up to dinner tonight. He hopes you will understand."

Lucy shook her head. "Of course I understand. Actually I'm still feeling pretty shaken. I'd rather be on my own anyway. Please thank Yannis for me. And tell him I'm so sorry about his friend."

"That's cool. He will be very grateful," Seraphina held out her hand. Lucy took it and felt that familiar empathic tingle. This time it was very strong, at least as strong as her own powers. Then she remembered the kiss.

"You really are one of us!" Lucy gasped.

"Of course. You are not alone. Never alone."

"But always females. Never males." Lucy sighed.

"That's true," Seraphina replied, reverting to words, "but I think there is a man for you, Lucinda Scott Hannay. And perhaps you will have a man for me. When we meet again."

"But....." Lucy said, "I don't understand. Who are you?"

Seraphina hesitated, "Doesn't matter who I am. Let's say I work for Trikos. I had not expected to find you here. But since by chance we have met I decided to give you something."

"Give me something? What?"

"You would not want to believe me if I told you. So you must work it out for yourself. But in order to live you must be prepared to die. Death is the key to life. You understand?"

"No," Lucy exclaimed, "I don't understand. What is happening to me?"

"Drew Quatermain has done something astonishing. Something utterly

miraculous. Something unbelievably dangerous. And you and I are a part of it. You and I are the first ones. The strongest. Now I gotta go. *Remember the dream we shared. Nothing can harm you now Lucy. Nothing in this world.*”

Before Lucy could stop her Seraphina was out of the room. Lucy ran to the door after her and flung it open. The long dark corridor was empty. Seraphina had vanished into thin air. On the floor of the corridor was a discarded pair of baggy cargo pants, a black thong, a dark green T shirt and a pair of cord espadrilles.

Wednesday came without further incident, either in the hotel or amongst the human seals basking on Little Banana. Lucy did not see Yannis and his friends again. The rib was no longer moored at the jetty and that mysterious encounter faded like two passing ships continuing their journeys into the concealing night.

Lucy packed her small bag of belongings and drove the jeep to the airport. One hour later she was in the Trikos Gulfstream with her father and surrogate mother, and her beloved half sister, heading back to another form of unreality.

CHAPTER 4

“So, you’re a journalist?” Adrian Graves was as Mike Throckmorton expected. In his mid fifties, slightly the worse for time, thinning grey hair, skin slightly wrinkled around the eyes. But he had kept his body trim and athletic. This was a guy who worked out. Probably had to if he was servicing the two very young, very blonde and very naked women sprawled on the mats beside the sensuously curved swimming pool which curled round like a investigative tongue into a cavernous room decorated in the elegant minimalism of seventies modernist architecture. And he was still definitively English, in spite of his years in America.

“Yeah,” said Mike, “I’m a freelance. You wanna see my accreditation?”

“No, not necessary Mr Sherringham. My people have checked you out. You’re okay. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I’m working on an article on the early history of the Trigonikos Group. I was hoping that you might be able to tell me something about the people who run it.”

“You mean Drew Quatermain?”

“Yeah, and the others. I wanted to know what they were like, back in the seventies.”

“Well, you’re too young to remember. The seventies was an amazing time. We were all young and shagging like there was no tomorrow. The girls were so hot for it. They’d just got the pill, you know. It changed our lives. A fantastic time.”

“I’ve already done a bit of research. So I have the basic outlines. You and Quatermain were at school together, I gather. And you stayed buddies after you left Eton.”

“Yes, Drew went off to this tinpot university, St Deiniol’s, in the back of beyond.”

“But he didn’t go straight to St Deiniol’s did he. He had a year out.”

“He went to an Oxford Crammer in order to get his ‘A’ levels up to speed. That’s where he met Jaz.”

“Jaz?”

“Yasmine. Yes, Yasmine. The Persian girl. Yasmine changed him. Something happened between them. Well, he was in love with her. He adored her. But she was so strange. Unbelievably beautiful, and crazy about sex, and he went along with it. He let her shag whoever she wanted, and she let him do the same, positively encouraged him, but they adored each other. Strange relationship. When he went to St

Deiniol's he bought this derelict isolation hospital miles from anywhere and turned it into a kind of hippy commune. Only they weren't really hippies. I think he was very much influenced by the Sandstone Experiment. Just down the road from here. You know, those first Californian swingers. Nowadays the sociologists call it polyamory. You know; spiritual harmony through group sexual liberation. But at that time he didn't have the money to do what the Williamsons did, so it was kind of down market, by our standards. It was pretty much a student thing. He used to organise these wild parties. King Kong Parties he called them. Then we realised we could make money out of them by selling very expensive tickets to well heeled students with a taste for screwing strangers. And he and I began to organise similar parties in London, for the City swingers. You cannot imagine what it was like then. Common enough now."

"Was that where the original stake money for Trigonikos came from?" Mike was penning careful notes into his reporter's pad.

"No, no, that was just pocket money. Drew had money. But Jaz had pots of money. There was some deal, which I never quite got to the bottom of, involving an Iranian oil tanker which disappeared in 1972, about a year before the Yom Kippur war. Then OPEC put up the price of oil dramatically. By the end of 1973 Quatermain was seriously rich. That's when Trigonikos really started. I had some money to put in, less than Drew, but more than a third of the money came from Marcus Scott. So technically he was the principal shareholder. He's never really taken any part in running Trikos though."

Mike reflected that what he had told Wavell had been wrong. Oil was involved. Drew Quatermain had supped at least once with the Devil. He returned to the meat of the interview.

"Okay, we'll come back to Scott later. What's Quatermain like, as a man?"

"Very clever, very fair, very moral, ethical anyway. What more can I say. He's a good man, and good men are rare in business circles. He's still like that, as far as I know."

"Even with such a sex life?"

"Yes, he never hurts people, especially women. He adores women. That's where I went wrong."

"What about the women? There were some women who were special to him. Is that right?"

"Yes, there was an inner circle. They all shared each other sexually, but there's more to it than that. It was never just about sex. They genuinely love each other. Really love each other. There's no jealousy. They seem to have outlawed jealousy. But it wasn't like that at first.

Okay, at first it was just about sex. Then something happened which changed all of them.”

Graves took out a packet of Gaulloise and lit one.

“You don’t mind? Would you like one?”

Mike shook his head. He did mind. Cigarette smoking was, in his view, a disgusting anti social habit. But in this case he would have to play along.

“They got the clap?” Mike laughed.

“No, nothing like that. They were, are, very nice boys and girls. Just horny as hell. No. But Yasmine Allam was seriously weird. When I first knew her she couldn’t speak. She was mute and had been diagnosed as autistic. But she could put ideas in people’s minds, especially Drew’s. He was always good with figures. But after he started shagging Yasmine his ability to analyse figures and extrapolate from them expanded almost exponentially. It was as though he could read the future. But it went beyond that. They had this idea that they were in some way gifted with psychic powers. Clairvoyance and telepathy let’s say. And these powers were at their strongest when they were screwing. Bizarre, or what.”

“Well, there were a lot of hippy cults around in the seventies, so I’m told, and sex played a part in most of them. Wannabe gurus setting themselves up as centres of spiritual enlightenment through communal shagging. But you say he could read the future. How did he do that?”

“I don’t know whether he could read the future. What he could do was hold together all the factors in the present which could lead to outcomes in the future and he could see which ones were most likely to actually happen. It’s more to do with probability than absolute certainty. Most successful businessmen need that. He just had a wider view than most. He can always see the whole picture and he’s very quick and very clever as well. A winning combination. He was, he is, almost always right. But I think that came initially from Yasmine. He made us all very rich. And for that I am eternally grateful to him.”

“Now; Marcus Scott?”

Adrian shrugged. “A scholar and a gentleman. Or gentleman scholar. Rather bland. I never really got to know him. Sorry, can’t help you much there.”

“Okay,” Mike turned a page in his notebook, “tell me about the women. What was their role in all of this?”

“Well, initially the Kong parties were just shagathons. We went at it like rabbits. But then Drew started talking about something he called the ‘cosmic consciousness’. I thought he was mad, but I played along because it brought in the birds and the money. He said that he and Yasmine could communicate with each other by telepathy, and that there

were other people out there with similar abilities, and the best way to find them was to shag them because shagging unlocked their psychic potential. They actually called it unlocking. You'd be surprised how many girls fell for that one."

"And did he find any; with telepathic powers?"

"I don't know. All of this went over my head. I was only ever in it for the sex, and the money. But he claimed that there were plenty of girls at the Kong parties who were empathic, and then he and Yasmine found a few who they said were like them. Genuinely telepathic. One of them was Caroline Hannay."

"Caroline Hannay?" Mike continued to play dumb.

"Yes, a postgrad theology student. Professor Scott Hannay now. Bloody hell, she could fuck. She came if you looked at her. And she went on coming. She'd bust your balls and then she'd talk your head off. Clever, or what. She gave Drew some ideas. Especially about the possible nature of the cosmic consciousness and the role of sex in spiritual enlightenment. Anyway, by this time they'd found four other women who they claimed had special psychic powers. She and Drew dreamed up this ritual sex thing. They called it the Circle of the Square of Three. It was meant to be three men and six women. Nine, see. The square of three. Two women for each man. Problem was they couldn't find a suitable third man. One with the necessary psychic powers."

"Were you part of this?"

"Of course I was. No red blooded young man could miss out on crumpet like that. Jesus."

"And do you have psychic powers?"

"Not that I know of, but Drew was my friend, and besides I had contacts in the merchant banks which were useful to him. So I was counted in. And I used to have this ability to keep my dick up indefinitely without coming. They thought that was rather clever and decided it was a psychic ability. I dunno. Maybe it was. I'm not quite so good now, but I can still out fuck those two." He gestured at the two girls by the swimming pool. "And believe me, screwing the girls in Drew's circle was something else. Especially Yasmine. Yasmine was extraordinary."

"So, what happened?" Mike was becoming more and more curious about matters which had very little obvious bearing on Wavell Meredith's interests but Mike shared Adrian Graves' enthusiasm for fucking and never missed an opportunity.

"There was another girl in the group. Sophie Devenish. Beautiful girl, half Greek, long dark wavy hair, huge eyes, so sexy and so innocent, and a body that could set the world on fire. Drew reckoned that her

history tutor had the right vibes and set Sophie and Caroline on to him. They were supposed to seduce him and bring him into Drew's circle. But Sophie fell in love with him, and because Sophie and Caroline were also in love with each other, Caroline joined her. That was Marcus Scott."

"Sorry, what do you mean, joined her?"

"They were bisexual. All the women were bisexual. Still are for all I know. They shared him. They still do. I had two of my own. Puck and Tinkerbelle they were called."

To Mike's amazement Adrian Graves suddenly burst into tears, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes.

"Sorry," he said, "some memories can be painful. I loved both of them. But they loved each other more than they loved me. I did something I shouldn't have done." He paused and looked at Mike as though seeking redemption for a sin beyond Mike's pastoral competence.

"You want to tell me about it?" This bit was part of Wavell's brief.

Adrian shrugged. "Drew Quatermain hates narcotics. He's got a real thing about them. He believes that drugs fuck up the brain chemistry. Permanently. He's right, of course. Anyway, I got Puck to try cocaine, much against her will, then we got high and we went in for a bit of bondage. You know. Just tied her to the bed. Nothing freaky. We'd done it before. But this time, at the moment she climaxed, she went berserk. She wrecked my apartment and nearly killed me."

"What do you mean, she wrecked your apartment? How could she wreck your apartment if she was tied up?"

"Believe me, everything that was smashable in the apartment was smashed. Things just flew off the walls. Chairs tore themselves apart. Mirrors shattered. My Hockneys were shredded. Everything. Then she threw me across the room without touching me and she was in my head. Totally berserk. My blood pressure went through the roof. I could feel the pain in my head. I knew if she didn't stop I was going to have a massive haemorrhage and I'd be seriously dead. Then she passed out. Next thing Drew's security people are in my apartment, and they take her away. A week later Drew offers me a billion dollars for my shares in Trikos and asks me to leave the company. He said the board of directors could no longer operate with both me and Puck on it. And he was not parting with Puck."

"So you left?" Mike was scribbling furiously.

"Yes, he was very nice, very persuasive and I was shit scared. I'd seen what Puck could do. I daren't think what might happen if I said no and they all decided to hex me. They could be a bunch of witches and warlocks for all I know. A billion dollars was one hell of a good offer.

I got out.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Mike restrained his incredulity, “she actually practised telekinesis.”

“What other explanation is there. She was screaming and howling and wrecking the place without lifting a finger. Is that weird or what.”

“Did you ring Drew or something, after she kicked off?”

“No, Drew just knew. Someone knew. I never used to take their psychic stuff seriously. Though I should have done after that first Christmas with Marcus Scott at Croxton Hall. But they always claimed that they could sense when one of them was in trouble.”

“Christ,” Mike exclaimed, “I wanted to find out about Trikos. I hadn’t expected this. Is there any more like this? Where did it start?”

“It started with the Circle of the Square of Three. We’d tried doing it with two men and two women in tandem. But that didn’t do anything because I wasn’t psychically up to it. Then Sophie persuaded Marcus Scott to join the Circle. And that did do something. Nothing for me. But the rest of them were changed. And they stayed changed. Marcus Scott had the power, whatever the power is. Together with Yasmine he changed all of them.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. As I said, whatever happened to them did not happen to me. They claimed that their minds, their individual consciousness, had merged into a common consciousness. They all became the same person. More than that, they claimed that their souls had left their bodies and become part of the cosmic consciousness. Ekstasis Caroline called it.”

“This is Zen claptrap,” Mike said disbelievingly, “were there any other manifestations of this power.”

“Not for me. But they did seem to know what the others in the Circle were thinking, and they knew what I was thinking. They constantly second guessed me. Sometimes it was very uncomfortable. But in business the ability to predict the future and second guess your competitors is a valuable asset. It made us all very rich. And for that reason alone I’m grateful to Drew Quatermain and I bear him no ill will. He did the right thing with me and Puck because Puck was much happier with Tinkerbelle and after what had happened we could never have worked together in the company.”

“Did this telekinesis thing ever happen again?”

“Not that I know. But I’ve been out of it for more than sixteen years now. I don’t think Quatermain would want it to happen again. In general they are very gentle people. I think they’re frightened of their powers and go out of their way to conceal them. But they are not like us, that’s for sure. Like a drink?”

Mike nodded.

“Glenlivet? Ice?”

“Sure.” Mike took the proffered glass.

The two men took a cautious sip at the whiskey which seemed to Mike to be curiously anaemic.

“What did they actually do, in this Square of Three thing?”

“Well, first of all they’d sit in a circle and just meditate. In the lotus position, with their hands on their knees, then they would join hands and that’s when they claimed they merged their consciousness.”

“And you never felt anything?”

“No, not really. I was aware of a kind of tingle, like a kid’s joke shock machine, or the static shock you can get from a television screen. But nothing else. Then, after the meditation, they stayed in a circle but each of the three men would take a woman from a kneeling position. The women would get themselves onto their partner’s dicks, and then they would each lean backwards so their heads met in the middle of the circle. It’s a difficult position to maintain. Ever tried it?”

Mike nodded, “yeah. The girl has to do most of the work.”

“That’s right. Then the girls who were being screwed would clench their feet round the men and hold each other’s hands, and the men would hold the hands of the girls kneeling next to them. That completed the circle. So the orgasmic energy released by the sexual acts going on in the spokes was transmitted round the wheel. The trick was for them all to come at exactly the same time. They claimed that they could each feel what the others felt and that allowed them to synch. If it’s true it must have been amazing. Imagine six simultaneous orgasms instead of only two, and shared round the whole circle. Except for me. How I envied them. But they only did it a few times. They said it was too intense. I think it frightened them. Then one of them committed suicide. You know, I think that was a factor. They certainly behaved differently after that. The King Kong parties stopped and they got serious about their sex lives.”

“This sounds like *hieros gamos*. The ritual sex in that crap book about the so called da Vinci Code.”

“Yeah, Caroline Hannay called it that. But then she dreamed it up. Thirty years before Dan Browne got to it. She had another name for it. The Great Rite? From Wicca? I don’t know about these things.”

Mike visualised the beautiful women whose photographs were in his files, imagining them as the three orgasmic spokes in this extraordinary sexual cartwheel. His body was already responding to his imagination. He fought it down.

“So, you left, but the rest of them stayed together.”

"Yes, we were together in Trikos for nearly twenty years. I left in 1992. Now I write pulp fiction. Which is almost as profitable for me as Trikos was. But only because I'm with one of Drew's publishing companies. I write total crap. But it gets published and it sells because the airport public likes reading crap and Drew's people push it. I think he gave me the chance to have a new career. I got the billion dollars from him for my Trikos shares, then I got millions more from the books and the films. He did much the same thing for James Sinclair."

"James Sinclair? The novelist?"

"See, you know of me, and you've heard of Sinclair. But you don't think of me as a novelist. James Sinclair is a proper novelist. He writes serious literary fiction. I write crap. But I make more than Sinclair. Though he makes enough. His books are popular, and he is good."

"Sorry, you've lost me," Mike raised his pen from his notes, "how does James Sinclair come into this?"

"Ah, well. Do you know where James Sinclair lives?"

Mike shook his head.

"James Sinclair lives at Croxton Hall, which is Marcus Scott's country pile. They all go to Croxton Hall, especially at Christmas. If you wanted to bump off the board of Trikos you should blow up Croxton Hall at Christmas. That's the crap novelist speaking. I would shoot myself before I harmed any of them. And Sinclair was also staff at St Deiniol's and is very close to Marcus. And I've just reminded myself of something I forgot." He paused and fumbled for another cigarette, then abandoned it. "Sinclair's wife, Hilary, is also one of them. And at that first Christmas, when we were all at Croxton Hall for the first time, something very strange happened."

"Go on," Mike knocked back his drink.

"We were all in Marcus's library to sign the Trikos incorporation documents. Marcus, Drew, Yasmine, and me. Afterwards Yasmine and Drew wanted to draw Hilary into the Circle, because they thought she had psychic powers and she would replace the girl who committed suicide, so making the circle complete again. Marcus got Hilary up from the kitchen where the rest of them were cooking the Christmas dinner. Yasmine went into some kind of trance with Hilary to show her what being in the Square of Three entailed. Then all hell broke loose. A bloody great book just flew out of a bookcase and crashed to the floor. Hilary came out of the trance and went ballistic, and this time it was Yasmine who was changed. Yasmine could suddenly talk. In Farsi, would you believe. And that's not all. Before they went into the trance Drew said Hilary had killed her previous husband somehow, by wishing him dead. Later I heard that he had a massive brain haemorrhage. I

don't know the details. The others knew, but they never told me. As I said, they're quite secretive about their powers. Anyway, later, much later, I thought about what Puck nearly did to me, and I wondered if Hilary had done the same thing to her husband."

"And did Hilary Sinclair join the Circle?"

"No, she absolutely refused. I don't know why. But the Sinclairs are still very close to them. They live more or less permanently at Croxton. The others go off sailing in the Med most of the time. Drew stays on his motor yacht. The point is, I met James Sinclair recently at a knees up at our publishers in London, and he said he'd got hold of Marcus Scott's manuscript and was going to turn it into a proper novel."

"Sorry, again. Does Marcus Scott write novels too? There are too many novelists in this story."

"No, no. Marcus did write a novel, but it was just a therapeutic exercise to allow him to get over the various crises he'd suffered at St Deiniol's. He wrote a first draft in 1973 then put it in a drawer and forgot about it. Sinclair's revived it, apparently. And he told me, strictly on the QT, that the novel included an explanation of what had happened to them and what they had become. But he also said that Marcus had not been able to finish the novel properly and that it was up to James to craft the ending. The way he said it made me think that it might be about more recent happenings. Could be worth your while to look at it. It will certainly be good on the early history of the Trigonikos people. The Kong Parties and the Square of Three. But he is a novelist, after all. It could all be just a work of fiction."

"Yeah, thanks for that. I'll buy a copy. What's it called?"

"Not for sale old boy. For their eyes only. Apparently Drew Quatermain doesn't want it published. You're going to have to use stealth to get a copy. You can try interviewing my editor. She knows about it. But Sinclair also told me he'd been using one of these print on demand publishers to proof his books. Seems he likes to read proper bound books for proofing, rather than galleys. POD is a quick and dirty way of doing it. If it's been lodged with a POD publisher there will be a computer file somewhere in PDF format. Computers are leaky things. Marcus provisionally called it *The Devil's Whore*, but I think James Sinclair was going to call it *Scholars and Gentlemen*. Safer title, probably."

"Did Quatermain tell you about Sinclair's book? Have you seen him recently?"

"No, I've not seen him since I left the company. My editor at Teleos Books told me Quatermain doesn't want it published. She's in a relationship with Sinclair's editor. Apparently James is trying to

persuade him otherwise. They never argue amongst themselves, you know. They always make reasonable decisions by common consent. Even Caroline Hannay. And she can argue. Christ, can she argue.”

“Who is your editor?”

“Claire Grey at Teleos Books. She’ll probably see you if I e-mail her and tell her you’re coming. They’re in London. Fulham Road. But watch out. She’s one of them. Doubt if you’ll get much out of her. It’s a long shot. You want me to do that?”

“Yeah. I’ve got to go to England soon. I’ll try to see her.” Mike carefully wrote the address into his notebook. Any idea why Quatermain doesn’t want it published?”

“Don’t know. Maybe Drew thinks it will give too much away. Or maybe it’s just for them. Not for the world outside. But in that case he might as well have done a dozen POD copies just for the family. The fact that Sinclair sent it to his usual publisher must mean that he expected it to be published in the normal way. Like all his other novels.”

“Okay, this is very good. And what do you think Trikos is doing now. Do you know anything about its plans?”

“Not really. Only what gets into the newspapers. After Yasmine died in childbirth Drew became more private. I do know he’s obsessed with finding a technological fix which will allow him to connect with the ‘cosmic consciousness’ so that he can communicate with the soul of his dead wife. A not uncommon delusion amongst widowers. Think of spiritualists, but in a physics laboratory. That’s why he pours so much money into academic physics and cosmology. He thinks the ‘cosmic consciousness’ is just a form of natural energy which can be communicated with, if only we can find out how. It’s all crap of course. Still, he’s got a new wife now. Maybe she has diverted him from his obsessions. As for Trikos, it goes from strength to strength.”

“They’re all getting on now. They must be the same age as you.” Mike mentally ticked another box and underlined another heading.

“You think so?” Adrian said sadly, “have you seen them?”

“I’ve seen recent photographs.”

“Can’t be too many of them. How recent?”

“Last year. They do turn out sometimes. Mostly to open university projects they’ve funded, or to attend charity fundraising events.”

“And do they look as old as me?”

Mike shook his head.

“No,” said Adrian glumly, “they don’t. I’ve seen photos too. Drew seems to have found the elixir of life. It’s only a matter of time before he markets it. Then we’re all fucked.”

“What about the travel business. These submarines and underwater hotels?”

“Pure Drew Quatermain. He’s read about it in some sci-fi novel and he’s going to make it happen. Underwater tourism for the middle classes. It should be real blast. He may be eccentric, but he’s still as sharp as razor. He’ll be in space before Branson. You’ll see. I do know that Trikos has a whole research division working on alternative energy. They’re trying to crack Vacuum energy. And who knows, they may just do it.”

“Vacuum energy? I thought that was too dangerous to mess with. Can turn the universe inside out or something.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. I’ve no idea what Vacuum energy is.”

“And the Quantum and DNA computers? Know anything about the Altair project?”

“Never heard of it. Not my field, I’m afraid. Drew Quatermain is a man of very eclectic interests. An intellectual omnivore. Wasn’t Altair the Forbidden Planet?”

“Yes,” said Mike, suddenly remembering something. “That’s true, it was. And the ARK project? Know anything about that?”

“Never heard of that either. What is it?”

“I’ve heard he’s collecting and digitising genomes for all living species.”

“News to me. But he’s always been interested in genetics. He’s interested in most things.”

“Well,” said Mike, folding his notebook, and then opening it again, “that’s all very fascinating. Just a couple of other things. Do you think that Quatermain is any kind of threat to the American economy?”

Adrian looked at him with an expression of total astonishment.

“Threat?” he said incredulously, “he is the epitome of the American economy at its best.” He stopped and thought for a few minutes. “I suppose, if he really has found some way of staying young that could have repercussions. The world is already grossly overpopulated. Even a small increase in the overall length of life could lead to drastic demographic problems. But I doubt if he has. So no, he’s not a threat. They’ve always tried to think no evil and do no evil. It’s cost them sometimes. They’ve walked away from iffy projects which have made other companies very wealthy. No. Drew Quatermain is an honourable man. A good man. And so is Marcus Scott. So long as they are running the show it will toe the line. And I’ll tell you something else for free. They can’t lie. They can be very devious though. Especially Quatermain.”

“Can’t lie? What do you mean? Everybody lies. Life would be

impossible without lies.”

“I mean they can’t lie. There is something in their genetic make up that prevents them from lying. The older generation anyway. I don’t know about the young ones. Young people these days seem to be in a permanent state of self deception.”

“Interesting. Do you know anything about their stem cell research and nanotechnology?”

“Yes, they do that. It’s not illegal here any more. And in my view the arguments for are much stronger than the arguments against.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, look at whose against it. It’s faith against reason again. Reason must win, in the end. Luther was wrong. Humanity deserved a better fate than faith. Faith is a lethal delusion.”

“Maybe. Luther certainly did me no favours,” Mike shivered, remembering a terrified child tied to a bed post and beaten black and blue for the love of God, “and what about their kids?”

“Hardly knew them. They were all born in 1981. They would have been around eleven when I left the company. But I rarely saw them. They were with Sophie at Croxton most of the time. She brought them up. Caroline went off and did her own thing, and Yasmine was dead. When they were small children I used to see them occasionally. They just seemed normal kids. But very bright. Especially Lucinda.”

“You mentioned earlier that this Claire Grey was one of them. What did you mean?”

“She’s an empath, telepath. Whatever. Most of the women who work for Trigonikos are. Two thirds of the people who work for Trigonikos are women and the other third are...well....strange...”

“Is that why they do the DNA testing on applicants for jobs?”

“I don’t know about that,” Adrian replied, “I was never involved with recruitment. But the women who worked for me were nearly all fey in some way or another.”

“Fey?” Mike queried, unfamiliar with the word.

“Fey. Faery like. Clairvoyant. Empathic. You know. Psychic in some way. You can tell. Quatermain collects them. From somewhere.”

“Humm...never heard that word before.” Mike put his notebook in his pocket and looked round the minimalist furnishings of the room, and then at the girls lolling on sun mats beside the pool. Curiosity got the better of him. “Tell me about the Kong Parties. What happened there?”

“Amazing, “ Adrian responded with enthusiasm, “it all went on in this old wooden hall, Pen something, Welsh name, I’ve forgotten. Penhesgyn Hall. This old isolation hospital. Anyway, we’d all get our kit off, maybe thirty, forty, equal, boys and girls. Then the fellas would

go into another room and draw straws for who was next, and the winner would be dressed up in a gorilla suit, with his dick sticking out. And then he had to catch a girl. There were rules. If the girls didn't run away from him they weren't playing. And no drink, and definitely no drugs. That was a bit odd, for the seventies. But the screwing more than made up for it."

"The girls could say no?"

"Absolutely. Drew insisted that nobody should do anything they didn't want to do. Anyway, once the gorilla had caught a girl the other girls would pretend to drag her to a kind of altar. They were supposed to struggle a bit. Just for the act. Well, there were wooden pillars supporting the roof, and they had ropes hanging from the trusses, and a swing. And the gorilla would either screw her on the altar, or on the swing. Or they'd tie her to a pillar, or to the hanging ropes, spreadeagled, with her arms above her head and the gorilla would screw her standing up, or try to screw her. Not so easy as you might think in a gorilla suit. Bit of a laugh sometimes. Bloody fantastic. I remember Sophie Devenish was a terrible tease. She used to climb up the ropes and sit in the rafters and taunt the gorilla to get to her. Have you ever tried shinning up a rope in a gorilla suit with your stiffy sticking out? But when she did let you catch her she was sensational. And Caroline used to do the most amazing sexual gymnastics. Marcus Scott must be one happy bunny, with those two. There was a lot of mumbo jumbo too. Drum music, and incense burning. And it was dark. Every guy was supposed to have a go in the suit. Some guys couldn't get it up though. Fear I suppose. And once a girl had been shagged, she was supposed not to run, so all the girls got their turn too. But they never knew exactly who was screwing them. A lot of people wore masks anyway. Especially at the London parties. It was horny as hell. Afterwards everyone just lay about until they'd recovered, then fucked anyone who was willing. And they were all willing. That's why they were there. I had more women in those two years than I've had in all the rest of my life. And that's saying something. You enjoy women?"

"You betcha." Mike certainly enjoyed women, and even this brief account of Drew Quatermain's imaginative orgies had been enough to give him a real boner.

"I like fucking them," Adrian said sadly, "but I don't love them any more. I only ever loved Puck, but I couldn't have Puck without Tinkerbelle. People say men find lesbianism a challenge. It's not true. Living with two bisexual women was fun at first, but after a while I came to resent Tinkerbelle. They loved each other more than they loved me. There was always that sense that I was shut out of something they

alone shared. And I couldn't cope with the telepathy. They always knew everything I was thinking. Sometimes before I even thought it. I like threesomes, but an ordinary man can only ever love one woman properly. Don't you think. They're genuinely polyamorous you know. The Circle of the Square of Three. They all love each other equally. They have to. Though even they eventually paired off. For convenience, I suppose. Sophie and Marcus, Jaz and Drew. Caroline floated between them and her career. Tinkerbell and Puck. Christ, just thinking about Sophie and Caroline is making me stiff. You too? You want to fuck them?" Adrian pointed to the two blonde girls by the pool. "California girls. Mel and Bryony. They haven't got half a brain between them. They just want to be like Paris Hilton. But they fuck like steam trains. They're both up for it. You up for it? Let's do it. Let's see who make them squeal longest. It's on the house."

Mike shrugged. This was not in his remit. But James Bond would not have hesitated, and neither did he.

CHAPTER 5

About one week after Mike Throckmorton had enjoyed the obliging Bryony and Mel, Nikos Scott was trying to get out of his house in Hanover Terrace in order to buy a newspaper.

"We can get the paper for you, sir," said the insistent security man.

"Listen, you're here to protect my wife. Not me. I can go out if I want to." Nikos was always exasperated at having to run the gauntlet of Drew Quatermain's security. He did not think that either he or Ayesha had anything to fear from anyone and he certainly did not intend to become a prisoner in his own house. He flicked his wavy hair back from his handsome face. He was like his mother, dark and sultry and distinctly Greek. Only the grey eyes which he shared with all his siblings told of his father. "I'm going out."

The guard shrugged. "I can't stop you," he said.

"I'm going for a walk in the Park. Then I'm going to Baker Street," Nikos continued. "And I'm going to buy a newspaper. And I'm going into Starbucks for a coffee. Alright. I'll be back in half an hour. Put it in your log, if you must."

The guard shrugged again, and made a note in his logbook. Nikos hated having these people downstairs, vetting everyone who came and went. It was especially embarrassing when he had his parties. His friends didn't like having to sign in for an evening's communal shagging. Discretion was important in these matters. But the guards were insistent. So there were friends who turned away rather than commit themselves to the security records. Others, the smart ones, just signed in as Jessica Rabbit or Fritz the Cat, and the guards turned a blind eye. Nikos made it worth their while. There was an unofficial bonus for them, and on party nights a couple of obliging Sloanes would usually go down to the security suite in the basement and give both of the guards a quick one. Just to keep them sweet. Mostly it worked. And they never came upstairs unless summoned. Which was just as well, given what went on upstairs a lot of the time.

Nikos bought his paper. He didn't have to, of course, but he liked to get out of the house and walk around with the ordinary people whose unfettered life he sometimes envied, even if increasing numbers of the people he met in the street seemed to be feckless obese slobs obsessed with booze, boobs and football. He positioned himself at an empty table in Starbucks, tasted his latte, and began to read the paper.

To his surprise there was an article in it about his father-in-law. Apparently Trikopfarm had devised a revolutionary new treatment for

drug addiction. Clinical field trials conducted over the last two years had been one hundred percent successful. Now Drew Quatermain was about to sign a contract with the NHS to deploy a drug which would disable the receptors in the brain which caused addiction and neutralise the hallucinatory effects of narcotics. It was described as a form of vaccination, and, if the contract was signed, it would become government policy to inoculate all schoolchildren against drug addiction. Put simply, no one would ever get high again.

Nikos wondered if it worked with alcohol. And cigarettes? And what about therapeutic psychotropic drugs which were given to mental patients? Nikos could see all kinds of problems. But if he could see them then it was one hundred percent certain that Drew Quatermain had seen them too. And Drew always knew what he was doing.

Like Drew and the rest of the family Nikos detested all forms of drug addiction and avoided drugs and alcohol like the plague. The lessons of that incident with Puck and the lecherous Adrian Graves had not been lost on their parents and had been drilled into their children with irreversible mental blocks. Drugs fucked up the brain. And in their case it made them extremely dangerous because they might lose control of lethal psychic powers they didn't even know they had. Telepathy could be lived with, just about, but killing people just by thinking at them was too horrendous to risk. No sane person took drugs. But the world of the normals was full of imbeciles who mistakenly thought that drugs enhanced their lives. On an impulse he took out his mobile and rang Lucy.

He'd always got on better with his abrasive half sister than his emollient twin, though he was well aware of the relationship between them. It was not that he disapproved of Lucy and Imogen sleeping together. They'd slept together since they'd been small children. One thing naturally led to another. And, after all, their mothers were more often than not doing the same thing with each other. Bisexuality apparently ran in the family. But Nikos had seen both of them in action with men and felt that they were wasting themselves on each other. They were both built for proper shagging, and he intended to get them back to it as soon as he could. Not that he could shag them himself, not even his half sister who he more than fancied. Incest was taboo, even within a family which tolerated pretty well anything else.

Phone conversations with Lucy were always fraught because Lucy had an inexplicable hatred of phones, and, although the abusive backchat was the normal currency of sibling love, Lucy also had a temper and was always likely to kick off for no obvious reason. Nikos had long ago given up trying to communicate with her telepathically because Lucy's

usual reaction to his intrusion into her mind was to transmit back to him erotic images of intimate parts of her own body which gave him an uncomfortably hard erection and an irresistible urge to ejaculate. In the interval which followed Lucy used the psychic energy released by his arousal to close off her mind to him. It was a nice piece of negative feedback which deterred Nikos from further psychic forays, especially when it happened to him in public. Latterly he had found it virtually impossible to make telepathic contact with his half sister who seemed to have erected the psychic equivalent of a spam filter to keep him out of her head. So he was obliged to resort to pedestrian phones.

“Lucy?”

“Yes, Nikos, what do you want?”

Why was she always so bloody curt on the phone? She was just like her mother.

“Have you seen this article in the paper about Trikos inventing a therapy to fight drug addiction?”

“No. For Christ’s sake. I’ve just got here. I was at the observatory all night. I’m in the café having my breakfast and I’m not in a good mood.”

“In the observatory? I thought you only did the maths?”

“What do you know about hens’ teeth Nikos. You’re an ignorant bloody historian. The observatory’s just a computer. I was in a computer room. Alright. I’ve was with a colleague who wanted me to look at something.”

“Oh, you spent the night with a man? That’s an improvement. Did he show you anything interesting? No. No. Lucy, don’t break the phone. Lucy?” There was a long silence. But the phone remained connected. “I meant, what were you looking at?” Nikos adopted his most placatory tone.

Lucy relaxed slightly. “You’ve got a one track mind. Like most men. A binary neutron star system.”

“And why is it interesting?”

“They’re about to crash into each other. Then they may go hypernova.”

“Does that matter?”

“If they go hypernova they will create a focussed stream of high energy radiation along the axis of the accretion disc. If it is pointing towards Earth when it happens there could be an intense Gamma Ray Burst and the Earth might fry. Does that matter?”

“Oh. Right. Sweet. What do you think about this Trikos thing?”

“I don’t know anything about it. I haven’t read the article. And I don’t care. I don’t take drugs. Only idiots take drugs. Now go away

Nikos. I want to have my breakfast in peace. Go away Nikos.”

This time the phone did go dead.

“Who’s Nikos?” Terry Gardner paused from his cornflakes and looked at the ravishingly beautiful woman across the table from him. Terry was head over heels in love with her. But she was totally unapproachable, except on a purely professional level. And he had buck teeth, unruly carrot coloured hair and a face as round and red as a ginger tomat. He could never ever hope to have breakfast with her, as he was now, across a domestic breakfast table.

“My half brother,” Lucy replied, “he’s an idiot. He went to Oxford!!”

“Oh, I went to Oxford.” Terry looked slightly squashed.

“Good for you,” Lucy replied, grinning.

“You want to stick with the neutron star thing? You can put the Dark Energy on hold. It’s been around since before the beginning of time. I’m sure it can wait.”

Lucy’s bachelor boss, Professor John Pendle, with whom she had just spent the night in the observatory, was also breakfasting with them. Terry was the first of the early breakfasters to arrive at the Comus restaurant after them and, as is usual in communal college dining, friends and colleagues tended to cluster together at the round tables. Lucy rather missed the long refectory tables she had known at Cambridge. But round tables did have advantages, and six or seven was generally thought to be the optimal size for debate. Anyway the Comus was a smart student restaurant in the modern idiom, not a medieval refectory, and the food was generally excellent. Lucy was no stickler for tradition.

“I don’t mind. If that’s what you want me to do.” Lucy began to butter her toast. Then changed her mind and drank some thick black coffee instead.

“How are things in biosciences Terry?” Pendle asked.

Terry thought for a while.

“Actually,” he said, “quite interesting. We’ve been sent some hominid DNA to sequence which they claim is three million years old.”

“Human DNA?” Pendle probed, then realised that he had just asked a singularly stupid question.

“No. Not possible. Humans like us have not been around that long. Less than half a million years. Three million cannot possibly be human. Some other long dead hominid maybe. Anyway, I’m not handling it. But everyone in the lab is very excited about it. It’s going to shake up the evolutionary debate.”

Lucy pricked up her ears. Vague memories of a forgotten dream resonated in her subconscious mind.

"Where's it from," she asked

"Dunno that either," Terry admitted, "I'm just a post doc. Like you. The professor is handling it."

"That's what comes of being at Oxford," Lucy laughed.

"Actually," Terry scratched his head, "would you two like to donate your DNA for sequencing? Prof wants to compare it to modern human DNA. We're taking as many samples as we can."

Lucy looked at John Pendle, raised her eyebrows, then turned back to Terry.

"Okay by me," she said, "I've already had mine sequenced, though. When do you want me to come to the lab."

"Do it now," Terry said excitedly, "I always come prepared." He pulled a couple of small bottles out of his pocket together with two surgical swabs sterilised in a sealed packet, "cheek swabs. Open wide."

Lucy obeyed, allowing Terry to linger over obtaining his sample from inside her cheek. John Pendle submitted to the same routine.

"Great," Terry said, "thanks ever so much."

"Hi Terry. Mind if I join you guys? What you testing for Terry? Is this a crime scene?"

Lucy looked up at the tall stranger. He had an enigmatically handsome face poised somewhere between Joaquin Phoenix and George Clooney. Broad shoulders, a slim athletic body and wavy dark hair. His casual chinos and tweed jacket were well cut, but in a style slightly different from the English. Either he shopped at Land's End or he really was an American. He looked back at Lucy quizzically.

"Oh, no" Terry replied, "no, not a crime scene, just collecting specimens. Yes, please, of course. Please join us." He gestured to the empty seat beside him, opposite to Lucy and Professor Pendle. "This is...er...umm. Dr Throckmorton. I'm so sorry I've already forgotten your er...Christian name."

"That's okay," said the stranger, "hi guys. I'm Mike Throckmorton. I've just joined Terry in biosciences. I'm a geneticist. I'm doing a post doc here."

"Oh," said Lucy brightly, "join the club. This is post doc central."

"And who are you guys please? I know Terry. Met him yesterday when I arrived. Do the honours Terry."

"Yes, of course. This is Professor John Pendle. Astrophysics."

Throckmorton half stood and extended his hand across the table to grip the professor's hand with the vice like clasp of authentic American sincerity.

"Pleased to meet you sir," he said respectfully to a man who was obviously too young to be a full professor and must therefore be very

bright.

“People usually just call me John,” Pendle replied, clenching and unclenching his hand to recover from the crushing grip. And in truth John was young. Mathematicians and physicists are believed to do their best work in their teens and twenties, and so it is not uncommon to find talented young men catapulted into mathematical Chairs far earlier than in most other disciplines.

John Pendle was tall and angular, with a narrow cheerful face and a shock of lank white blonde hair which he was constantly flicking back from his pale blue eyes. He had gone to Cambridge as an organ scholar and combined a brilliant mathematical mind with a love of the arts and music, and a quirky sense of humour. Pendle was an admirable man who took an instant dislike to Throckmorton whose entire persona seemed to be transmitted through the brutality of his handshake.

“And you are?” Throckmorton asked, disingenuously extending his hand to Lucy.

“This is Lucy Hannay,” Terry said, “also Astrophysics. Throckmorton took Lucy’s hand and, as the palms met, he felt a mild shock, like the static from a television screen, and at the same instant he felt something click in his brain, as though it had shut off for an instant, leaving him momentarily unconscious. The sensation was so strong that it took him by surprise and he sat down again rather more suddenly than he expected, without ever tightening his grip on the slim elegant fingers. Seconds later he remembered what Adrian Graves had said. As the hands came apart he looked into the face of a breathtakingly beautiful young woman, whose thoughtful grey eyes skewered into his soul. Her platinum blonde hair was plaited in a tight pigtail tied off with a large lace bow. Her face was solemn, vaguely nordic, and golden brown, and there was an unbelievably sexy mouth. Wavell had been right. She was not like Uma Thurman. She was more like Daryl Hannah. From one angle sultry and sexy, from another severe and academic. Hole in one. Within two days of arriving he was already on target. All he had to do now was seduce her. Once fucked most women would spill the beans. That’s the way they were.

She looked at him curiously, her brow furrowed slightly. A thought formed in his head. *I don’t think so. Not in a million years.* Then it was gone. He hesitated, then plunged into the standard question and answer dialogue of the newly introduced.

“What are you working on Lucy?” Throckmorton asked. Lucy looked up at John Pendle who smiled at her and turned his head ever so slightly from side to side.

“I’m working on Dark Energy equations,” Lucy replied, wondering

why John Pendle wanted her to keep stumm about the neutron star.

“Interesting.”

“Where are you from Dr Throckmorton?” Pendle asked, resting his chin on his fists, his elbows on the table. Where are you from did not mean where did you come from? Where is your home? It meant which university are you from? What is your academic pedigree? The first thing one academic will ask another on meeting for the first time.

“Did my first degree and master’s at Harvard. Then Cambridge Caius for my doctorate. Been back in the States bumming around for a few years. Then I guess I wanted to get back into academic life. I miss the buzz of academic research. This project at Keele looked interesting.”

“Which project is that?” Pendle asked.

“Same one Terry’s working on. The ARK project.”

“Which is?” Pendle inclined his head slightly.

“It’s a privately funded project,” Terry interjected, “an Anglo American company called Trikos is collecting and digitising genome samples from all known species. It’s a huge project. We’re just one cog in a very big wheel. I suppose that’s what attracted you, Dr Throckmorton. American project.”

“Please call me Mike. Yeah, and the money. Not many post docs pay this well.”

“What are they going to do with all these genomes?” Pendle’s voice was sardonic, “knowing the Americans you’ll probably patent them and then charge us for existing. And isn’t Trikos owned by an Englishman? Drew Quatermain?”

“That’s right John. An Englishman. But he had an American mother.” Mike’s response was equally sardonic. He had already sensed that he was not among friends.

“I’ve got to go,” Pendle said abruptly, “you coming Lucy?”

Lucy stood up and followed Pendle out of the restaurant, leaving Mike looking at Terry in astonishment.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“They’ve been up all night. Probably tired,” Terry replied.

“Gee. Are they an item?”

“I dunno. Don’t think so. They’re often together though. Maybe. I dunno.” Terry did not want to think the unthinkable.

Mike Throckmorton also gave an inward curse. If the Hannay woman was with Pendle it might be a little more difficult to seduce her.

“You want to give me a swab?” the enthusiastic Terry asked.

“Sure,” Mike replied unenthusiastically, “why not.”

Outside the Comus Professor Pendle turned to Lucy.

“You’re very quiet Lucy. Something wrong?”

"No," she paused, "well yes. I got some really bad vibes off him. He's not what he seems."

"Me too," Pendle nodded, "I didn't like him. Not often that happens. You know how easy going I am. But when I shook his hand I felt something. Like a shock. There's something wrong with him.... Something...."

"I felt the same," Lucy replied, looking at John curiously, "sorry, I'm very tired. Actually I think I'll go home and have a nap."

"Yes, do that Lucy. Thanks for coming on board with the neutron star. I think it will be interesting. But I don't want our new friend to know about it."

"Don't worry. I don't want anything to do with him. He's a creep. John..." Lucy started to say something, then thought better of it.

"Yes..."

"No, forget it. I'll talk to you about it later. I'm going to bed."

They parted company, Lucy to her small tutor's flat in Lindsay Court, Professor Pendle to his rather larger flat in the old house at the Hawthornes. Once in their respective rooms both of them simultaneously connected with their friends and lovers. Pendle by email with a colleague at Harvard. Lucy by telepathy with Imogen.

Indolent Imogen was still in bed at Croxton Hall in the company of a more than normally vacuous piece of chick lit about a girl with a one track mind. She put the book down, rolled over onto her back and brushed the thick dark waves of hair away from her gorgeous eyes.

"Lucy."

"Yes. Imogen. I've just met one."

"Met what?"

"A man with powers like ours."

"Not the professor? I thought you said he wasn't very strong....have you fucked him? Is he really like us?"

"No, no, not John Pendle. He's American, and he's not like any of us. He's a bastard. He's been sent to spy on us."

"Spy on us? Why would anyone want to spy on us?"

"I don't know. I think he works for the CIA or something and he's been sent to chat me up and find out about us through me. I don't know why."

"What does he look like?"

An image followed.

"Oh gosh. He's a hunk."

"I don't think so."

"What's he called?"

"Mike Throckmorton."

"Throckmorton? Isn't that the maiden name of Drew Quatermain's mother?"

"I didn't know that. How on earth do you know that?"

"I just know. I hear them talking. Drew mentioned it once. Lucy, You have to sleep with him. It's the only way to be sure. Maybe this is the fate you talked about."

"Sod fate. He's a bastard. I don't trust him. I'm certainly not going to sleep with him. He does want to shag me though."

"Maybe we can change him."

"Oh, yes! That's what all new wives think. I'm not sleeping with him. No way."

"Well, if you won't, I will."

"No you won't. And I'm keeping out of his way. And you aren't coming to Keele."

"Oh please Lucy. Please, else how are we ever going to find someone like Dad. We can't miss any opportunity. You know how important it is for us to find a man like us. We have to have children like us. This is the first one. Maybe we can control him. If we can read him. Can he read us?"

"I don't know. I read him the minute he touched my hand. I couldn't stop. It was too strong. He's very powerful. But opaque. He doesn't know what he is. Strange, John Pendle didn't like him either."

"Lucy, please sleep with him. Don't get involved. Just fuck and go. You know, like we do with boys. It doesn't mean anything. Unless he's for real."

"Maybe. Actually, I've had a thought. Since you're so keen to screw him maybe you can. Maybe I'll invite him to Nikos's party. I won't tell him what kind of party it is. He'll get a shock, but I know he'll be up for it. He's a high testosterone fella. He likes screwing, but he doesn't respect women. Tell you what. You go instead. Let's play the identical twin game. Make your boobs and bum smaller, go blonde and pass yourself off as me. He'll won't know. Then you can shag him and see what you think. Try not to let the parents find out. Keep your mind closed."

"Are you implying that your bum is smaller than mine?" Imogen's mind was laughing.

"You know what I mean. We can make out bodies whatever we want. Remember how we used to fool Nikos. If he couldn't tell us apart I doubt if the American can."

"Yeah. Okay," Imogen was still laughing, "I'll think about it. Are you going to go as me?"

"No. I think I will arrange another assignation."

"The professor?"

"Maybe," Lucy added an afterthought, *"Imogen. Is James Sinclair at Croxton at the moment?"*

Another affirmative followed. The two minds re-engaged with time and drifted apart.

Seconds later James Sinclair awoke from an involuntary nap, stared in alarm at the unfinished sentence on the screen of his computer, then picked up his trilling phone.

"Uncle James."

"Lucy?"

"Yes, uncle James, it's me."

"Lucy. How lovely to hear from you. When are coming to see us? Sophie says you had a good time on Skiathos on your own. She says you went to a nudist beach."

"I didn't tell her that," Lucy said, almost regretfully, "we're grown up now you know. She must have got it out of Imogen. I wish Sophie wouldn't do that. We should have some secrets."

"She loves you. That's why. And you can't really have secrets can you. Not the way you are. I'm lucky. It doesn't come to me in the same way. Not telepathy. Something else speaks to me. The Muses maybe. But Hilary can read my mind, so I have no secrets from her. Do come for a weekend. Everyone else is here. Marcus, Sophie, Caroline, Imogen, Hilary and me. We'd really love to see you."

"Uncle James, I've got a terrible confession. I've lost your book. I don't know how. I think I left it on the beach. I was going to tell you as soon as I got back. But I forgot. I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry. It's not going to be published anyway. Drew thinks we can be recognised from it. He's right, as always. So we've agreed to pull it. How far did you get into it?"

"I'd just started reading the chapter about the Square of Three. Then the book went missing. I really liked the chapter where the Sophie and Marcus characters go off to a hotel and make love to each other. That was lovely. Really beautiful. So romantic. They did love each other so much didn't they?"

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

"They still do love each other, and your mum. All together. They're one person. One soul in three people. Anyway. Never mind. Don't worry about the book. It's been erased. Drew even asked me to take it off Lulu. So, it's all gone. Everything wiped, like the Weshesh, erased from history, as though they had never been. I have such a debt of gratitude to Drew. I won't argue with him about it. Marcus doesn't seem to care.

So, forget it. How's the research?"

"The Weshesh? What are the Weshesh?" Lucy felt the slightest tremor of another distant memory.

"Ah, of course, you didn't get that far in *Scholars and Gentlemen*. The Weshesh were one of the tribes of the Peoples of the Sea. Greek seaborne refugees from the Trojan War. They ended up in Egypt and were exterminated or enslaved by Rameses the Third. Sophie believes that she is descended from a woman of the Weshesh. She thinks that's where your powers come from."

"I wish I'd been able to finish your book."

"Well, maybe we'll talk about it. When I see you. But how's the research?"

"Interesting. I've been taken off Dark Energy and asked to do some calculations on a neutron star."

"A neutron star. Should we be worried?"

"Yes, maybe. If it goes hypernova."

"What's your prof like?"

"Nice guy. I like him. Cool dude. Very clever. And not at all geeky. Actually I really rather fancy him, but I don't know how he'll react when he finds out about us. So, I haven't made a move on him. And he's a practising Christian. I don't want to hurt him because it can't last. In the end we have to be with men like us. Uncle James..."

"Yes,"

"Nothing, nothing....it's okay... I want to talk about something. But not over the phone. Give my love to mum and dad and Sophie, and Hilary of course."

"Your mum's here, if you want to talk to her. We're in the library."

James looked across at Caroline who had stopped her work on the other desk and was looking expectantly at James. "I think she wants to talk to you."

Caroline crossed to James's desk and took the proffered phone.

"Sweetheart, are you okay?"

There was a very long delay. Lucy did not want to talk to her mother.

"Yes mummy. But something's happened."

"Tell me."

"It's well...I've met another man who has powers like ours. But..."

"Lucy, that's amazing. The first one in thirty years. You must sleep with him."

"No, no. He's not exactly like us. There is no light in him. Not darkness, but no light. A kind of ..."

"*Dark with excessive bright....*," Caroline murmured.

"Yes....not darkness....but not light," Lucy replied.

"Then he is one of us. That's how the men are. Dark with excessive bright," Caroline sighed, "ah, Milton....Satan's best apologist. He must have been one of us too. He understood it all but couldn't accept the truth. James understands this. Our souls speak through authors. But they don't always understand what they are being told."

"I don't understand either. And you won't bloody well tell us, will you. Anyway, I don't want to sleep with him. He's evil. He's been sent to spy on us. I wasn't going to tell you 'cos I know exactly what you're going to say.."

"Spy on us? Why?"

"I don't know."

"Lucy, listen to me. Listen to me. If what you say is true he may be one of us. You must sleep with him to be sure. But be very, very careful. Find out what you can about him. Find out why he's spying on us. Lucy?"

"I told you. I knew what you were going to say. And get out of my mind." The phone went dead.

Lucy enjoyed talking to James Sinclair. Although he wasn't really her uncle she had always treated him as one, and James himself enjoyed the role of surrogate uncle. He didn't have the gift of telepathy, so Lucy and Imogen could talk to him without the fear that he was looking into their minds. In fact James Sinclair could look into minds, but, like John Pendle, his insights into the cosmic consciousness came to him through his subconscious from a very different source. Her inquisitive mother was another matter. She had already sensed the subtle intrusion of Caroline's questing mind into her own consciousness. Caroline's telepathic powers were limited, by Lucy's standards, and only really took effect when she was very close to people, sexually excited, or on the phone, where the electromagnetic fields of telephony seemed to provide a conduit for her psychic energy. Lucy hated being spied on by her parents and had learned how to block them out when their presence was unacceptable, or so she thought.

Caroline looked mournfully at James, and handed the phone back to him.

Through the windows of the study James could see his wife Hilary returning from her morning ride, the great dapple grey horse walking slowly up the long drive to the golden stone hall which was their communal home. Croxton Hall enveloped them in its warm womb, shielding them from the pain of humanity. Somewhere in the grounds there would be Fangdale the gardener, watching over them, his soul patrolling the house and its lands as it had done for countless

generations. The Fangdale James had first met in this house was still alive, although incredibly old. Now it was his son who was the guardian. Fangdales had been at Croxton since the very beginning.

"Sooner or later," James said to Caroline, "you're going to have to tell them."

"Pity she didn't finish your book," Caroline replied, "fiction is more subtle than fact and easier to assimilate, and you don't have to believe in it for it to affect you. But you're right. They are going to have to be brought into the Circle. At their age it's a terrible risk. And how do you tell an intellectually brilliant post doctoral rationalist that she's actually a witch. Not to mention the genetic thing, which I still can't get my head round. She won't believe me. I didn't. I still don't."

"I don't see why you can't tell her. You lot knew when you were their age. And you may be descendants of witches. But you are not witches. Tell her she's a demi goddess, or something. That's closer to the truth."

"No," Caroline replied, "in other lives we have been saints and scholars, gods and goddesses, devils and whores, physicists and physicians, witches and wizards, everything that humanity could have been, except for being human. But mostly we've been scholars and healers, because we love life, and we have always been hated for it. We've always known we have special powers but we've only recently found out what we are and it's too dangerous to take risks with our unknown capabilities. You know what Hilary did, and what Puck nearly did to Adrian. Their powers are much greater than ours. God knows what they can do. Lucy's just like I was at her age. She's wilful and can't control her temper, and Nikos and Ayesha and Imogen can't control their lust. They'll shag anything that moves. Until they learn to control their ruling passions they cannot be allowed to know what they might be capable of or what their true destiny is."

"Just like you were at their age," James smiled at her. It never ceased to astonish him that they all looked so young even though he understood the reason why. In his eyes Caroline was still a flawlessly beautiful young woman, the same beautiful young woman who had once given herself to him to comfort him in a moment of blind despair. Nothing except her emotional maturity could distinguish her from her equally flawless daughter. "What did she want?" he asked, "she was going to say something to me, then changed her mind."

Caroline pulled a face.

"She changed her mind because she sensed that I was with you and she didn't want me to know because she thinks I'll interfere. But she told me anyway, and apparently Imogen knows. It's easy to get things

out of Imogen. Imogen's soft, like her mother."

"What's the problem?"

"She thinks she's met a man like us. But she thinks he's evil and she thinks he's been sent to spy on us. She should sleep with him and find out whether he really is like us. You know we need to enter each other physically as well as mentally to find out the truth. And if he is like us then we need him to breed from. Lucy and Imogen have a duty to our survival as a species. You know how difficult it is for us to conceive, and besides, neither of them have been fully unlocked because they've never met a strong enough man. They can't mate with their father or Nikos. Drew is the only other possible candidate, but he treats Imogen and Lucy as though they were his own daughters so he won't screw them, even just to unlock them, let alone breed with them. There has to be new blood."

"Better to be careful," James said quietly, "you people never take evil seriously, yet it's all around us. Evil is real, as much a force in your universe as the light which guides you. Lucy could be right. He may be evil."

"Humans are evil," Caroline said tartly, "because their souls are asleep and they cannot see what they are. And I don't believe in that Manichean dichotomy. There is no force of evil. Only the light. It is the absence of the light that makes humans evil. And the light is life. If this man is like us he too must be a child of the light and so he can't be evil."

"I cannot see what you can see, and so I cannot judge," James replied. "Marcus and Drew have been very successful at keeping you all out of the human bearpit. But if someone's been sent to spy on Lucy, then someone somewhere has made the connection between this family and Trikos. If that is so, then you are all in danger."

"Why should we be in danger now? No one knows about us. Drew has deliberately used his celebrity status to draw all the attention away from us. He takes all the flak, he always has. We've never really used our powers for fear that people would ask questions. And Trikos has never done anything but good for humanity in general."

"Well, humanity is notoriously ungrateful. The problem is that Drew has just made his first mistake, and it's a catastrophic mistake. You read the paper this morning. Things are not going to be the same again."

Caroline perched herself elegantly on the edge of James's desk and looked at him dolefully.

"You mean the drugs thing?"

"Yes. Evil is not going to like that."

"Yes, you're absolutely right." Caroline thought for a while, then

smiled at James and kissed his cheek. "I'm going to have to go to Keele and talk to my bloody minded daughter. She isn't going to sleep with this man. I don't blame her. She's young, and she's frightened. Nevertheless we have to find out what this 'spy' is up to, and who sent him. So she is going to have to do as she's told, for once. And if he's for real, then we need him. And I'd better have a quiet look into Imogen. Because I bet she knows about this. Those two don't have many secrets. You know what they're like."

"You'd better tell Drew. Nikos and Ayesha could be in danger. They're out in the big bad world too."

"No, not yet," Caroline looked thoughtful, "you know what will happen if we tell Drew. He'll take control. This is early days. And anyway, Nikos and Yesha have security. Lucy is the one at most risk. Let's just see what we can find out for ourselves, and then we'll tell Drew."

James nodded. Caroline was right. But there was a perceptible risk. He wondered whether it was a risk worth taking.

CHAPTER 6

John Pendle had to wait for three days before he got a response from his friend in Harvard. The result was not what his gut instinct expected. Throckmorton was genuine. He was in his late twenties. Graduated at Harvard *summa cum laude* and had gone on to take a Ph.D. at Caius Cambridge, exactly as he had said. He'd dropped out of sight for a few years, then he'd gone to work for the American Government in a department created to monitor corporate malfeasance, with special responsibility for detecting illegal research in genetics and gene therapy. It was all entirely credible, and obvious why he was here. Mike Throckmorton was not to be trusted.

He sat back in his chair, put his feet up on his desk and thought about Lucy, as he so often did. Lucy was also very clever. He was lucky to have her at Keele. She could easily have taken a junior fellowship in Cambridge, or Oxford. John Pendle had never really thought very much about women. His whole life had been dominated by his research. Intellect ruled, and the mysteries of the universe far eclipsed the mysteries of the flesh, though, like many virginal physicists and mathematicians, he was not above looking at the girls in *Playboy* and wondering whether women really were like that. Lucy wasn't like that. Lucy was very beautiful. Slender and elegant, though she tended to conceal her elegance under rather grungy jeans and sweaters. She had a delicate face and beautiful bleached blonde hair which she usually wore brushed back tightly into a single plait. Sometimes she wore it loose, and, when she did, it flowed round her face and over her shoulders in soft undulating waves making her look like some Pre-Raphaelite elf. He wondered what her home background was. In spite of her taste for tacky clothes she had the confident air of the effortlessly rich. He knew that her mother had also been an academic, a professor of theology, or something like that, because he had once complained to Lucy about the avalanche of managerial crap which flowed daily across his desk demanding that he account for every instant of his time, and she had said that her mother had resigned her post rather than put up with the lunatic performance targets which were strangling serious academic research and innovative teaching.

Apart from knowing about her mother, and her exemplary academic record, John Pendle knew hardly anything else about Dr. Lucy Scott Hannay, except that her father was a farmer. He sighed. He was thirty four, a professor in a good university and well respected in his field. But he had never had a woman, and had no idea how to even begin to

get one. He could not deny that he was strongly attracted to Lucy but he would never dare to approach her. Lucy was from another world and would not look at geeks like him. So, neutron stars would have to be an acceptable substitute. This neutron star was not going to be a substitute for anything. If his instinct was correct, and Lucy's calculations confirmed his own, humanity could be facing a cosmic nemesis. What they were observing now had already happened thousands of light years ago. It was as inevitable as death. Indeed, it was death, not just for the Earth, but for any other living organisms which fell into line with the deadly jets of high energy gamma rays which would spew out of the poles of the collapsed stars. At some stage someone would have to be told the grim truth. Or maybe it was better not to know, since there was nothing that could be done to avert the consequences of staring down the barrel of a cosmic weapon of mass destruction which had already been fired. And in any case humanity had only a fifty fifty chance of surviving the next century without destroying itself, one way or the other. So the neutron star was not the most immediate problem. Not for mankind anyway.

Mike Throckmorton did not have such problems. He did not know about the neutron star, and would not have cared if he did. He did know about women though. He had enjoyed more of them than John Pendle could possibly imagine, and had treated all of them with equal contempt. Women were merely consumables, like ice creams or beefburgers. Fuck and chuck was his philosophy. He was sufficiently charming and attractive to disarm them, and, once disarmed, the rest was easy. They lay on their backs for him and let him do whatever he wanted, and when he got bored with them he left them for the next one. Dr. Hannay, however, was proving to be a tough nut. He tried turning up in the Comus at times when he thought she might be there, but somehow she regularly outsmarted him. He began to behave like a love struck teenager, deliberately lurking in places where he might hope to meet her, but on the odd occasions when their paths did cross, she merely acknowledged him and walked on. Any hope of getting close enough to her to be invited to meet her family was so far out of the question.

The work he was doing with Terry Gardner at the ARK unit was essentially boring, and mostly automated. But he regularly had breakfast with Terry in the Comus restaurant on the off chance that Lucy would turn up again. Terry was obviously infatuated with Lucy Hannay and talked about her incessantly, but knew virtually nothing about her and was frequently disconsolate because he saw her so rarely. Mike did,

however, watch her from a distance. If Lucy was rich she didn't show it. She lived in a cramped Tutor's Flat in one of the halls of residence. She had a boring Honda Civic saloon, and wore clothes bought at Next, which were scarcely the cynosure of fashion. In another age she might have been called a blue stocking. From time to time he did meet her on the Campus, coming out of the library, or on her way to the Astrophysics Department in the Leonard-Jones Laboratories, and occasionally she was to be seen walking round the grounds of Keele Hall with John Pendle, deep in astrophysical intercourse and apparently oblivious to the crude American who was so desperate to attract her attention.

Nor had his trip to London to see Adrian Graves's editor at Teleos Books been any more productive. Claire Grey was in a relationship with James Sinclair's editor right enough, but neither she nor her partner wanted anything to do with a pushy American jock. So he was given the run around and came away with no more information than he had gleaned from Graves himself. The book was no longer available. Attempts to hack into Lulu.com were equally unproductive, partly because of their very effective firewall, but mainly because all files relating to Sinclair's work had been deleted.

As a result of these setbacks Mike Throckmorton's encrypted e-mails to Wavell Meredith were decidedly thin, though, unknown to Mike, Meredith had highlighted sections from his account of his meeting with Adrian Graves and passed them on, as directed, to the boys upstairs. Then, out of the blue, his luck seemed to change. He arrived early at the Comus restaurant and found Terry and Lucy breakfasting together, as they had been doing the first time he had met them. He sat down next to Terry and looked at Lucy across the table.

"Hi," he said, "long time no see. Where you been, you sexy thing?"

To his astonishment Lucy responded to his crass greeting by smiling sweetly at him.

"Hi Mike," she said amiably, in a voice loud enough to be heard half way across the Comus, "Would you like to fuck me? I know you want to."

Terry's jaw dropped. Mike went bright red and struggled for words. She had deliberately caused him acute embarrassment. Half of the undergraduates at the other tables were looking at him in astonishment. But this was too good an opportunity to miss. He had to tough it out. Never mind what his companions thought. Once he'd screwed her she would be his and he could move on to the next stage of his investigation.

"If you're willing, I'm willing," he said quietly, "your place or

mine?”

“Neither,” Lucy replied, cool as ice, but with an enigmatic smile dancing around her exquisite mouth. “I’m going to a party at my brother’s place in London in a couple of weeks. You can join me there, enjoy the party and meet my family, and you can fuck me. If you still want to.”

The entire café had fallen silent. Young and curious faces focussed on the extraordinary conversation. This was not how seductions were conducted in contemporary chick lit.

“You’re on,” Mike replied decisively.

“Is it that sodding easy!” Terry exclaimed, his ginger face bright red with rage and shame, “bugger you, you American bastard. And Lucy!! I’m ashamed of you.”

Lucy looked at Terry and smiled at him. She sensed his rage and disappointment and allowed a tender thought to filter into his consciousness with all the gentle warmth of a summer kiss. *You’re my friend Terry. One day I’ll explain, but don’t be hurt. I can’t love you Terry. Not the way that you want me to. But I am your friend. I despise him but I have to do this.* Terry suddenly felt totally reassured, but left the table nevertheless. Lucy turned her attention back to Mike Throckmorton.

“I’ll let you know when and where. You will have to meet me in London.”

“But,” Mike began, “shouldn’t we....”

“Not here. There is someone on Campus I rather fancy and I don’t want to compromise my relationship with him. Okay. You’re a grown up man. You should understand. Think about it. You’ll get a one night stand with no complications. But I don’t want to be seen with you around here. Okay?”

Mike shrugged. He would have to wait.

Lucy sat back in her chair and speared him with a look of barely concealed contempt. There was a long silence, then an undergraduate on an adjacent table turned round and prodded Mike in the back.

“Would you like to shag me too?” she asked, leering at the handsome American, “you won’t have to wait for two weeks for me. In fact, if you come to my room in Lindsay Court at two o’clock this afternoon, I’ll give you a shag you’ll never forget.”

The handsome American mentally undressed her. Astrid was round faced with bob cut black hair and a voluptuously juicy body. In a few years time, unless she was very careful, she would be decidedly plump. But right now she was as ready as a ripe plum, and he could tell that she was hot for it. He would be foolish to refuse such an offer. Lucy

stood up and prepared to leave the table. As she did so Astrid turned to her.

“You don’t mind do you Dr Hannay.” It was statement rather than a question. Mike had the uncomfortable impression that he was being set up and that these girls were laughing at him.

“Not at all Astrid. Warm him up for me. He’s going to need it,” she said sweetly, then, looking straight at Mike. “See you in a couple of weeks, lover boy.”

Mike watched as Lucy strode out of the restaurant and savoured the rhythmic flick of the tiny buttocks tightly squeezed into a pair of hipster jeans. Shagging her would be an act of patriotic revenge. These English girls were not the delicate submissive flowers he had remembered from his days in Cambridge. Half of them were as fat as pigs, with massive thighs, gross tits and exposed bellies oozing over tight miniskirts, and the other half were as feisty as hell and insolent with it. Well, girls this cheap did not deserve respect. So he would fuck and chuck. Which is what he usually did anyway. He turned his attention back to the bob cut Astrid, whoever she was. A bird in the hand, and all that.

“Are you serious, babe?”

“Yes, of course I’m serious,” Astrid grinned, revealing a set of perfect teeth, “how could I resist a hunk like you?”

“In that case,” Mike spread his hands out in a gesture of acceptance, “is there anyone else here who wants to enjoy the American dream?”

There was a subdued giggle from the girls on either side of Astrid, then a sharp faced blonde with a peek-a-boo bang grinned at him lasciviously.

“Maybe,” she said. “Astrid can check you out. And if you’re any good, we’ll draw up a rota. Do you do threesomes?”

Another burst of lecherous laughter.

“You betcha,” Mike snapped in frustration. Girls were not supposed to treat him like this, “and I will come, at two o’clock,”

“Of course you will,” Astrid laughed, “I guarantee it.”

Yet more laughter. Astrid scribbled something on a bit of paper and flicked it at Mike. It was her room number in Lindsay Court. She stood up, followed by her friends, all of them in tight hipster jeans which exposed naked midriffs and exiguously covered bottoms decorated with tattoos, or the just visible straps of a thong. They really were scum, he thought. What they needed was a dose of Gonzo sex. That would put them in their place.

“Got to go. Nine o’clock lecture. See you later masturbator.” Then they were all gone and Mike was on his own with his toast and cornflakes, being looked at quizzically by a group of slack jawed spotty

boys who had been listening in and wondering what the American had that they didn't have, other than being American. He ate his toast in silence, drank his coffee, and made his way to Biosciences and the ARK unit where Terry refused to speak to him.

Lucy sprawled in the armchair in John Pendle's room and looked at the calculations she had just completed on his circular blackboard. Pendle was working his way through her equations.

"Are you sure about this?" he said.

"Yeah, I think so, for the time being. The combined axis is shifting and their orbits are decaying faster than we thought. They will collide. Very soon. And the combined mass of the two stars will be enough to trigger a singularity. It will go hypernova eventually. I'm still working on when."

"Well, technically, it's already gone hypernova. It's just that the light from it hasn't reached us yet. When we see it is when we may get the Gamma Ray Burst, if one of the poles of the accretion disc is eventually going to point in our direction. We need to know when that photon burst is going to reach us. I think we need more measurements. I'd like to be one hundred percent sure. We are talking about the survival of the human race, after all."

Lucy pulled a wry face. "Well, it's a moot point whether the human race deserves to survive. And even if it does eventually point in this direction it will not be for hundreds of years. Humanity should have killed itself off well before then."

John Pendle shook his head again. Lucy's capacity for Olympian detachment was sometimes alarming. He believed in a compassionate God who cared for his creations. The collapsing neutron star with its implication of cosmic Armageddon was hard to stomach. If God was not in control of the universe he could not be God. Lucy, it seemed, did not find this to be a problem. He surveyed his splendidly disorderly office. John worked on the volcano principle of document filing which meant that the whole room was awash with piles of books, academic articles, and random bits of paper which defied any rational order. But he knew exactly where everything was and confidently expected the important things to spew out of the summit of the volcano when he needed them. Less important things, like the interminable managerial forms and barmy bureaucratic edicts, would sink eventually into the stagnant magma at the bottom of the heap.

"Lucy, you're in a bad mood, what is it?" He lounged back in his chair, put his feet on his desk and flicked the shock of blonde hair back from his eyes.

"That sodding American. He just wants to shag me. Arrogant bastard. Why do American men think that they're God's gift to women?"

"It's their culture," Pendle said philosophically, "they can't help it."

"What bloody culture? They're so...gross!!"

"Are you going to?"

"Going to what?"

"Let him shag you."

Lucy sighed, "I've called his bluff. But if he wants to shag me he's going to have to go to London to do it."

"And if he does....go to London."

"I'm an honourable woman," Lucy laughed, "I'll keep my word. It's just sex, after all. It's not as though I'm going to fall in love with him."

"Lucy, Lucy," Pendle shook his head sadly, "you girls play dangerous games."

"Well, quite by chance I've got him off my back for the time being. The Lindsay Court bicycle met him at breakfast this morning and offered herself to him. She rather fancies him, I think. And she and her friends will give him such a good time that he'll forget about me."

"He won't forget," said Pendle sadly, "you are his target. He wants more from you than just sex."

"Sorry," Lucy paused and looked puzzled. In general she and Imogen did not go deep into the minds of people outside the family, though it was often hard to resist the temptation to send little messages, as she had to Terry when she had sensed his distress at breakfast, but she wondered whether she should look more deeply into her boss. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just got a bad feeling from him. When I shook his hand he nearly crushed it. Americans do that to make people think they're sincere. But I felt something else. A kind of electric shock. And for an instant I thought I saw into his mind. It was very strange. He wants to know all about you. He's on a mission. To spy on you. It's not about sex. That's just his *modus operandi*. He thinks that if he screws you, you'll open up to him. What are you hiding Lucy?"

Lucy's grey eyes look into Pendle's limpid blue eyes, her brow furrowed.

"Fate does not do these things," she said quietly, "one, perhaps, but not two in the same place." Then she remembered that fate had put all three of her parents, together with Drew, Jaz, Puck and Tinkerbelle, into the same place at the same time. If she had believed in God she would certainly have agreed that he moves in the most mysterious ways his wonders to perform. But Lucy was a rationalist and did not believe in Gods, though she did understand the mathematics of probability, and in

this case the odds were highly improbable.

“What do you mean?” Pendle echoed.

“Nothing, give me your hand,” Lucy stood up and reached across the desk to Pendle, holding out her hand to him. Pendle reluctantly reciprocated. But there was no sensation as the fingers touched. Pendle was not like them. But neither was James Sinclair, and yet James Sinclair really was like them, only his powers had manifested themselves in a different way. None of her various parents had realised this at first, and had left James out of their calculations for over twenty years. Now they knew the truth. And they weren’t telling. But James also knew the truth and had written it down. She wished she hadn’t lost his book. She continued to hold John Pendle’s hand.

“Did you feel anything?” Lucy asked.

“No, well, yes,” Pendle released her hand and sat down again, “there was the same kind of shock, only not as strong. Gentle almost, if an electric shock can be gentle. Just static I suppose. Keep away from my computer,” he laughed.

“What am I thinking about?” Lucy said.

“What?”

“What am I thinking about?”

Pendle hesitated.

“You’re thinking about your half sister. I didn’t know you had a half sister. Her name is Imogen. Lucy?” his voice rose in a query, “how did I know that?”

“What does she look like?”

“She’s beautiful. Like you. Sunburnt complexion like you, but dark not blonde. Long dark hair with long beautiful waves. And she has gorgeous eyes. Huge grey eyes. And she’s so gentle, and she loves you. My God, Lucy what’s happening?”

“I wish I knew,” Lucy said, withdrawing the image from John’s mind, “when I know I will tell you. If I ever get to know, that is.”

John Pendle shook his head, “that was totally weird Lucy. I’m a physicist. I don’t do weird. Except for quantum weird. It was as though you were actually in my head. And you’re in love with me.”

“There’s nothing weirder than physics,” Lucy laughed, “especially quantum physics, and yes, I am in love with you. Sooner or later I’m going to have to make love to you. Would you like that?”

Pendle’s face flickered from exultation to panic. He had never touched a woman before, let alone made love to one. He would not know where to start. And why should he start? He didn’t really know Lucy and if she was going to allow herself to be screwed by the American, what hope was there for him. And in any case, was it wise

to get involved with a woman who treated sex so lightly. But, like all true scholars, he was curious, and his curiosity would eventually lead him into Lucy's body.

"Don't worry," she said, gently taking hold of his arm, "it won't be for a while. And there is nothing more natural than making love. It won't be a problem for you. But think about it." Another image floated into Pendle's mind, this time of Lucy herself, but naked and lustful, and his body was already responding.

"Are you really in love with me?" Pendle was retreating rapidly. His confidence in himself was undermined by her sexual authority but his dormant libido was awakening and opening doors to exciting possibilities. He could easily fall in love with Lucy, if only he knew what love was.

"Yes, I think so. We have a lot in common, don't you think?"

Pendle stood up and came round the desk to meet her. Lucy put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Tentatively at first, and then with increasing passion. Then she stood back from him and looked at him solemnly. Pendle was visibly shaking.

"You see, we are meant for each other. Soon we'll go somewhere nice and make love. I have an idea about that. But first I need to sort this thing out with the American. What you felt about him is what I felt. It can only be tested by sleeping with him. I don't want to sleep with him, 'specially after what we've just done. I'll meet him in London. But I'll persuade him to sleep with my half sister. Once he's seen her he won't need much persuading."

"Lucy? I'm a professor. I'm not stupid. What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry. Trust me. All will be explained. I hope. I'd better go. There's someone I need to talk to. Remember that I love you. That's enough for now." She kissed him again, this time running the tip of her tongue gently round his lips and then sliding it into his mouth. Then she was gone.

The nonplussed Professor John Pendle, still trembling and trying not to think about the throbbing thing between his legs, opened his desk drawer and took out his bible. In the past he had never found it difficult to separate his strong Christian beliefs and his scientific research. God, he believed, could be approached by reason alone, and the more he probed into the mysteries of the universe the more confident he had been that it was all the work of God. But the lethal neutron stars had shaken that faith. If God was all powerful and so loved mankind, how could he allow mankind to be annihilated by a cosmic accident from which there could be no escape. And now there was Lucy. Like Simone at Platis Yialos, he had instinctively felt something very strange about

Lucy and feared it. Now he felt something just as strange about himself. Something previously unrecognised. But Lucy had recognised it. He had seen it in her mind, in that brief instant when the two minds had met. This defied reason. It defied God. And in some subtle way it had already changed him. He leaned forward on the desk and placed his head in his hands and began to pray for enlightenment and for forgiveness, because he knew that when the time came he would do whatever Lucy asked of him. His innate curiosity would require it. Mysteries were there to be explored and understood. In the following two weeks he found his heart getting closer and closer to Lucy.

Mike Throckmorton was not troubled by questions of guilt or forgiveness. Astrid had been as good as her word. When he turned up at the designated time she was waiting for him wearing a kimono dressing gown which was off before he had even closed her door. Astrid was a big girl. Strong, with big tits and a white hot pussy. She almost tore his clothes off, couldn't wait to get his dick into her mouth and squealed with delight when he eventually stuck himself into her. There was none of this nonsense about interminable foreplay. Astrid was nineteen and didn't need foreplay. She got straight down to the business. And she went on squealing and yelling as he threw her about, first in the missionary position, then from behind, then the scissors. Astrid knew it all. And Mike was very good at it too, and came back for more. She was enthusiastic, inventive, and unbelievably horny. Anticipated revenge turned into unexpected pleasure and an invitation to a return visit which became a regular assignation. On the third visit Astrid turned into the peek-a-boo blonde called Charlotte, just as horny and just as inventive, and on the fourth visit it was Charlotte sucking his dick whilst he licked out Astrid's throbbing pussy.

Mike Throckmorton was hooked. These girls behaved like men. Not submissive but equal to him and able to repay his violence in kind. He slapped them and they slapped him back. He bit their tits, and they bit his buttocks. He tied them to the little bed and rogered them like a piston engine and they tied him to the bed and had him groaning for mercy, keeping the whole hall awake. It was the best sex he'd had for years, and very different from the enthusiastically submissive Mel and Bryony.

"Whadya know about Dr Hannay," he asked, one day, in between erections, as he massaged Astrid's ample breasts with one hand and stroked Charlotte's newly waxed pussy with the other.

"She's okay," Charlotte shrugged, "don't see her much. She's usually

up early and often doesn't come back 'til late. Unless she's on duty here. Very disciplined. In love with her work."

"Two weeks is nearly up. You still going to London to shag her?" Astrid asked, rolling onto her elbow and releasing a torrent of mammary flesh into Mike's face.

"Would you mind?" he asked, "if I go to London."

"God no. It's only sex. Come back and tell us how you get on. Nobody else seems to be fucking her. Bit of a waste really. She's a beautiful woman. Much better than us. She should be fucking someone."

"Speak for yourself," Charlotte gasped as Mike's finger worked its magic.

"Oh, we're pretty enough," Astrid said, "but she's beautiful, though we've never seen her without her clothes. But I'd say she's got a fabulous figure."

"I've seen her without her clothes," Charlotte was still panting, but was past the first fine rapture.

"When?" Astrid asked indignantly, "you never told me."

"I went down to her room once, to ask about something. Stop that, Mike," Charlotte snapped, pushing away the questing fingers, "it's getting sore. I'm not going to come again. Anyway, she'd just had a shower and she was in a towel. When she saw it was a woman she just let it drop. I wondered if she was lesbian or something and it was a come on. I was tempted for a minute. Well, women make love to each other much better than men. But she just seemed very unselfconscious. I don't think she was even aware she was naked. And she has a fabulous figure. Everything just right. Lovely tits. Not too big, and firm, and high up. Not a bit like Astrid's melons. And slim as a rake. And that lovely skin colour, as though she's permanently sunburned all over. And she waxes her pussy. The whole works. If she fucks like she looks you're in for a good time."

"That doesn't follow," Astrid said, "she could be frigid."

"I don't think so," Charlotte replied, "it's all there, she just doesn't use it for some reason."

"I really meant, do you know anything about her family, you know, that kind of thing."

Both girls shrugged.

"Don't know," they said, "I've hear her dad's some kind of gentleman farmer," Astrid took the lead, "must be a bloody rich one. And her mother was a professor, somewhere. Not here."

"She's definitely well heeled," said Charlotte, "though she certainly doesn't spend her money on clothes. Shops at Next, for God's sake."

"Where do you shop then?" Mike asked.

"Well, if I had her money I wouldn't shop at Next. It would be Prada and Yves St Laurent for me."

"You seen her new car?" Astrid interjected.

"What new car?"

"Take a look. It's in the tutor's spot in the car park. Go on, get up and take a look." Astrid twisted Mike's dick so hard that it hurt. He got up and gingerly twitched opened the curtains of Astrid's first floor room. Lucy's battered Honda Civic had been replaced by an almost new Aston Martin DB9.

"Jesus," said Mike, "see what you mean. How long's that been there?"

"Couple of weeks, " Astrid pulled a face, "it comes and goes. If I could afford a car like that I don't think I'd be bothered with astrophysics."

Mike continued to look at the gunmetal grey car and, as he did so, Lucy came out of the building and crossed to the Aston. She opened the trunk and threw an overnight bag into it, then got into the car and drove away. Mike closed the curtains and fingered his rising dick. The girls looked at him expectantly. Then he remembered the present he had acquired for them. Astrid's room was tiny, and the single bed was scarcely big enough for two bodies thrashing around, let alone three. He picked his way through the rubbish and cast off clothing on the floor until he found his trousers. In the back pocket was a little poly bag with a few grams of white powder which he had discovered could be bought without effort, and very cheaply, from desperate hoodies on street corners in Stoke on Trent.

"You guys into coke," he said.

The two girls looked at him, then shook their heads.

"We used to be," Astrid sat up in bed, "but we've kicked it. Easy peasy with this new anti drug thingy."

Mike looked slightly disappointed. He didn't do drugs much himself, but these girls seemed so high most of the time that he assumed they were into something.

"What anti drug thingy?" he asked. In his experience giving a broad a quick snort was a sure fire way to one hundred octane sex. But then these girls already did one hundred octane sex. Maybe they didn't need coke.

"Oh," said Charlotte, "last year they were doing these tests on this new drug which breaks your addiction. They were paying volunteers to try it. Astrid and me were getting a bit dependent and it was beginning to cost us too much. So we went along to the Medical School. And it works. We're both clear."

“What actually happens?” Mike’s curiosity was now as aroused as his pecker, “how’s it administered?”

“One of those nebuliser things. You have a puff and they give you a vitamin pill, then you go home.” Charlotte paused, “‘bout a week later you have a sort of sneezy twenty four hour head cold. After that. Nothing. We’ve tried coke and grass and ecstasy but neither of us felt anything. Might as well have snorted talcum powder. And the craving has totally disappeared. Big relief really. Drugs are a pain really. But the pushers must be pretty pissed off. Their market here has disappeared.”

“Pretty well everyone on campus went for the tests,” said Astrid, “well, at a two hundred quid a go, it’s worth having. There’s no drugs problem here now. I don’t think there’s anyone on Campus taking anything. Even alcohol. People drink as much as ever but they don’t actually get drunk. That’s a pity. I used to enjoy getting smashed. Can’t remember why. Still, there are beneficial side effects.”

“Such as?” said Mike, whose revived dick was now sticking out like a ramrod.

“Well,” Charlotte gurgled, “ever since we had the drug we’ve all been as horny as hell. We seem to have swapped addiction to drugs with addiction to sex. We can’t stop screwing.” She pushed her mouth onto him until he was half way down her throat, then Astrid grabbed her and pulled both of them down into a giggling writhing heap on the litter strewn floor.

The following day there was a letter in Mike’s pigeon post in the Biosciences Department. Inside was a handwritten note for an address in Hanover Terrace London, a date and time two days hence, and a plastic card with a computer printed bar code. Nothing else. Nor was there any sign of Lucy or the Aston Martin. Lucy had obviously gone early. Two days later Mike filed his latest report to Wavell Meredith, put on his best suit and went to Stoke railway station with Astrid and Charlotte who came to see him off. As he nonchalantly boarded the London train he was surprised to find that both of them were in tears

“Just sex,” he said, putting his arm round them and kissing each in turn.

“Come back to us,” Charlotte replied, “screw Dr. Lucy, if you must, but come back to us. You’re one hell of a good shag. For an American. And we love you.”

CHAPTER 7

Wavell Meredith had never been to the CIA headquarters at Langley. He was aware that the Department of Homeland Security liaised with the CIA. But the extent and obligations of that dangerous liaison did not become apparent to him until he received an unexpected summons to attend a briefing session with a mysterious Colonel Anstruther on a subject which was not to be disclosed in advance. Now he sat at the end of a small rectangular table in a small office with bare beige walls and small transom windows from which nothing could be seen but a grey Virginian sky. His three inquisitors looked at him suspiciously. The only one in uniform was an Air Force colonel. Afro American, slim and athletic beyond his years, with a crew cut and deep set dark brown eyes. Unlike the others his face was friendly and not unsympathetic. The other two were archetypal CIA suits, both middle aged, one pudgy with a round face, puffy apple cheeks and and furtive blackberry eyes lurking behind narrow rectangular frame-less spectacles. The other was tall with a bald shaved head and a harsh presbyterian face, underpinned by a lantern jaw, snake eyes and an aggressive manner. Wavell did not take to either of them.

"We'd like to know how you are getting on with the Quatermain file," snake eyes asked.

"Would you like to tell me who you are?" Wavell asked.

"My name is Ormen Lange," said snake eyes. "My colleague Greg Barbas," he indicated the pudgy suit, "and Colonel Anstruther."

Anstruther leaned over the table and offered Wavell his hand. Wavell took it. The grip was firm and reassuring. "So, how are your investigations into Quatermain going?" Lange repeated.

"I think he and his friends might be in danger," Wavell replied.

"Too fucking true," Barbas growled under his breath, "we've read the reports from your field agent. We would like more intel on Quatermain."

"This guy Throckmorton is slow in delivering the goods," said Lange, who was obviously the more senior of the two suits, "what's he actually doing?"

Wavell had once been a fully tenured professor of anthropology at an Ivy League university. He had a strong objection to managerial suits, even if they were themselves Ivy League graduates. These two reeked of the banal evil of malign bureaucracy. They were not to be trusted.

"How do you know about Throckmorton?" Wavell began to be annoyed.

"Your reports to Homeland Security have been passed on to us, and

your email traffic is routinely monitored,” Lange said.

“Well,” Wavell snapped, “I take exception to that.”

“You work for us Professor Meredith,” Lange said through slit lips, “never forget it. Now, what’s he doing?”

“His brief was to infiltrate Quatermain’s family and friends and report on anything he found interesting.”

“Why hasn’t he found anything?” Barbas asked impatiently.

“Well, it might be easier for him if he knew exactly what it is that he’s supposed to be looking for. He’s getting closer to her family. He’s going to a party next week where he expects to meet Lucy Scott Hannay’s folks. What more do you want? He isn’t James Bond. These things take time.”

“We ain’t got time. We need to get someone into the Trigonikos Group soon as. Your guy is not cutting it.” Lange look at Wavell contemptuously. It was no surprise, Wavell thought, that the US was constantly on the wrong foot intelligence wise because the agencies were more interested in fighting each other than fighting a common enemy, whoever that might be. Wavell rather thought that Mike Throckmorton was right. The Trigonikos Group was a thoroughly law abiding and morally sound company which just happened to be run by some slightly wacky people. But the guys who ran Apple and Google were pretty wacky too. Nothing wrong with that.

“Why?” Wavell asked, “since you’ve apparently seen Throckmorton’s report you must know that so far all we have is a vague suggestion from Adrian Graves that some members of the Trigonikos board of directors have paranormal powers. We don’t believe in paranormal powers. Graves is probably out of his head on smack or something. What is your interest in this? You’re not still pursuing that psychic warfare nonsense, are you?”

“No,” Barbas replied, “but we don’t rule it out. If it exists we’d certainly want it, but at the moment we’re more interested in the genetic engineering. We want to know exactly what Trikopfarm is doing. We have two ways of dealing with this. Either we snatch some senior executive from Trigonikos and render them somewhere where we can beat it out them, or we infiltrate the family and get them to tell us over dinner. The former is on hold, the latter depends on your guy getting his dick out and making that girl fall for him. But he’s running out of time.”

“There is a third way,” Wavell replied sarcastically, “why don’t you just ring up Quatermain and ask him?”

“Because,” Barbas snapped, “we’ve already tried that. The answer was not affirmative. Drew Quatermain is one smart cookie, and he’s also

a guy with a moral mission. Not religious, but altruistic anyway. He doesn't believe in taking life. He says his mission is to save life. Not to take it. When we asked him about genetic engineering he knew at once what we wanted it for and it was a negative. He won't tell us willingly. We need some serious leverage on him. And that means intelligence, and then action. There must be something crooked somewhere he can be threatened with. No one gets to be that rich by honest means."

"Well, if you've read Throckmorton's reports," Wavell retaliated, "you'll know that Drew Quatermain's companies are squeaky clean and that Lucy Hannay is clearly a very clever girl, not some cheap lay. It's not easy, even for a super stud like Mike Throckmorton. He just can't get close to her."

"Okay. Then, suddenly, he gets invited to a party. Who's going to be at this party and what kind of party is it?" Lange asked.

"I don't know. I don't think he does either. But it's at the Hanover Terrace house where her half brother lives, and since he's married to Quatermain's daughter I guess she will be there too, and his parties are known for one thing, apparently."

"Well good luck to him," Barbas said sardonically, "it sure is an honour to be hired to fuck for America. Wish my dick was in his pants."

"Quatermain's daughter?" Lange lingered on the words as though savouring them.

"Yeah, Ayesha. Nikos Scott's wife," Wavell sighed. "What, exactly, do you want from Quatermain?"

"Okay Wavell," said Anstruther, intervening for the first time, "this is mostly on a need to know basis, and obviously you need to know a little more. We are interested in two things. Firstly this story from the Graves guy that one of the Trigonikos women nearly killed him with telekinesis. You may laugh, but we do have a Psi Ops unit working on this kind of thing. It has obvious military applications. If someone has this power, we'd sure as hell like to meet them. Telepaths could be a formidable weapon." He paused and looked at his fingernails, as if debating with himself whether to continue to the second point. Lange was looking daggers at him, willing him to shut up. Eventually Anstruther decided to defy Lange. "The second thing is this account in Throckmorton's latest report about the testing of new drugs to inhibit drug addiction. Apparently Trikopfarm has been testing it on British university students and on drug addicts in prisons."

"It's a common enough practice," Wavell retorted, "not illegal, either here or in the UK. The students know the risks and they get well paid."

Campuses are ideal places to test responses to treatments. Prisons too. They can contain it if anything goes wrong, and set up control groups.”

“Perhaps. Two years ago Trikopharm tested a revolutionary AIDS drug on known HIV positives. It worked. One hundred percent. One hundred percent.” Anstruther repeated, to emphasise his point.

“Yes,” said Wavell, “I remember that. It was in all the papers. The first big breakthrough.”

“There are some,” Lange interjected, “including elements close to the White House, who think that AIDS is a just punishment for sexual sinners. Trying to cure it is flying in the face of Divine justice.”

Wavell shrugged. The White House had always rested on a dense bedrock of religious nutters.

“That’s not the point,” Barbas continued, “the point is that only a few test patients were treated using the nebuliser procedure described by Throckmorton. They got better. We don’t yet know how it works. It’s like homeopathy. There’s nothing obviously there except a harmless virus which occurs naturally in the human body anyway. But, whatever it is, it seems to work.”

“Point is,” said Lange, “the AIDs therapy was tested in hospitals, hospices and other semi closed communities around the world. But not on the general public and not at all in the States. It was never actually tested or put on the market here because the drug regulation agencies couldn’t figure out how it works and Quatermain wouldn’t tell us. It isn’t even patented, presumably because that would mean revealing the secret. But the bottom line is that it does work. Now, although it was never allowed here, the incidence of AIDS in the States has dropped dramatically. It seems you don’t have to take the treatment to get the cure.”

“What?” Wavell exclaimed, “what do you mean?”

“I mean that people outside the centres where it was tested began to spontaneously recover from AIDS type diseases without apparently being treated with the new therapy. It just spread. And it got here in much the same way that flu or a common cold gets here. With passengers on an airplane.”

“That’s ridiculous. Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

“We think that maybe what Trikopharm has done is to create an infection which cures a specific disease. Once initiated by treating a sample group it spreads spontaneously throughout the population. They’re using a disease to cure a disease. That’s why he never really put it on the market. It was sold for a limited period and at a giveaway price in a selection of AIDS hot spots in the Third World, then taken off the market. He just released it into the world. For free. Quatermain

has taken it upon himself to vaccinate the World against AIDS.” Lange scowled.

“Surely that’s a very efficient methods for delivering vaccines,” said Wavell, “but have you any proof? Maybe somebody just brought a nebuliser here illegally?”

Barbas shook his head, “possibly,” he said “we don’t know. But in order to repair the immune system the therapy must entail some form of gene replacement. If so, it’s being delivered by an entirely revolutionary method. And that’s why we need to know how it works.”

“It’s one thing to vaccinate against disease,” said the Colonel, “quite another to initiate a global process which folks can’t refuse and which, apparently, can’t be stopped.”

“Does it matter,” said Wavell, “if the outcome is beneficial surely Trikopfarm should be applauded. We’ve never had scruples about compulsory vaccination against a whole range of diseases, TB, diphtheria, polio, small pox. You name it, we’ve vaccinated against it. And we put stuff in the water supply. These guys have just found another technique for vaccination. Good for them. And good for humanity.”

“First of all,” Lange snapped, “the great American public has a right to choose whether or not to be treated for diseases it might not have. Secondly, what right do these guys have to dispense unknown and unapproved medicines in a sovereign state without the permission of the American Government. And thirdly. Having been successful with AIDS, Drew Quatermain has now taken it upon himself to kill off the entire narcotics industry using a similar technique. Which means that the mechanisms used in this therapy must have multiple applications.”

“Bravo,” said Wavell, clapping his hands, “the more I hear about Drew Quatermain the more I like this guy.”

“Trigonikos may be a giant company, but it’s not a sovereign state. It cannot impose its will on the rest of us.” Lange slammed his fist onto the table, “the narcotics industry is a three hundred billion dollar industry. It feeds a lot of mouths and it weeds out the weak and feckless. If Quatermain is using some method of mass infection to immunise punters against drugs then a lot of folks are going to be mega pissed. Mega pissed.”

“Enough of this crap,” Wavell was getting angry, “what exactly do you want me to do?”

The three spooks looked at each other, then at Wavell.

“As I said we’ve been able to partially analyse the material used in the nebuliser,” Greg Barbas was evidently the resident scientist, “both for the AIDS treatment and for this new treatment for drug addiction.

In both cases the liquid in the inhaler consists of a neutral fluid carrying an attenuated version of a common virus the only apparent effect of which is to give the patient a mild head cold. Very mild. Just sneezing and brief post nasal drip, but enough to infect anyone coming into contact with the patient. Same symptoms for both the AIDS and the narcotics therapies. It's clear that the virus is merely a carrier for something else. But we don't yet know exactly what. What we do know for certain is that it is highly infectious and, once infected, the carrier stays infected. Any transfer of bodily fluids transmits the virus. Now, hear this. If what happened with the AIDS therapy also happens with narcotics, then it's probably got to the US too, by the same means."

Barbas paused for emphasis. "Now. The bottom line. I don't give a tinker's fuck for AIDS or narcotics but we do know that there is a specific gene which predisposes some people to narcotic addiction, and in order to cure AIDS you would have to be able to reverse the damage done to the immune system by the HIV virus, which in both cases means repairing or replacing the patient's DNA by targeting specific genes. The bottom line is that we think that Quatermain's scientists may have found some new way of delivering tightly focussed gene therapy transmitted by infection to very specific loci on individual genomes. We need to know how it works. If they can miraculously change DNA to cure AIDS, and block the gene which facilitates drug addiction, then what else are they capable of? Is he going to vaccinate us against sex in order to kill off the porno industry?"

"Actually," the Colonel intervened, "it says in the last report from Throckmorton that these girls who'd been for the anti narcotics treatment have had their libido enhanced. They want to fuck all the time. Is that true? I like the sound of that."

"I only know what Throckmorton has reported," Wavell replied, "how ironic; make love not war. And what a brilliant way to spread a benign infection. I like Quatermain more and more. He has a real hippy sense of humour."

"He's a fucking limey subversive," Barbas snapped, "but the bottom line is that Quatermain and his immediate circle are in extreme danger and we need to get to him before anyone else does. Put simply, Quatermain is offering people immunity to narcotics of all kinds, whether they want it or not. The guys in the Mafia and the drug barons are seeing their financial empires disappear under their noses and there's nothing they can do about it. Incidentally it also seems to work with alcohol and cigarettes, up to a point. So they're also pretty pissed. And when they're pissed they kill people. And our Arab friends would doubtless also like to know how it's done. So someone, somewhere, is

bound to be out for Quatermain's blood, and so are we because we need him to tell us exactly what he's doing so we can persuade him to give us the weapons capability. Either that or we wipe him and his associates just in case he does anything stupid, or the Mafia or the towel heads get to him first. You have to keep him alive until our guys find a way to get him to cooperate with us. We need the exclusive rights to this technology. Understood?"

"My guy is not a field operative," said Wavell, visualising Drew Quatermain releasing a genetic dove of peace into an ungrateful world determined to shoot it down before it had time to do any good, "he fancies himself as a bit of a James Bond type, but he's only had basic weapons and combat training. He's not competent to take on professional hit men. Anyway, Quatermain is a recluse. He's unbelievably difficult to get close to."

"We're working on that," said Anstruther, "but I agree. There's unlikely to be a hit directly on Quatermain. There are other ways of leveraging him. His kids and family for a start. Just make sure your guy gets close to them and stays close until we can get better assets in position. Is he armed?"

"No, he isn't," said Wavell, "he's an analyst. He wasn't expected to be in any kind of danger. He was selected for this mission because he is good at seduction and fucking and he has postgrad qualifications in genetics. Not because he is natural born killer. Anyway, as you say, Quatermain is one very smart cookie, do you suppose for one minute that he hasn't thought of these dangers?"

"I guess so," said Barbas angrily, "listen Wavell. You still haven't grasped the plot. There is another dimension to this. Much more urgent. We know that human DNA has markers or loci which identify racial origin. It has always been our nightmare that some maniac somewhere will find a way to use genetic racial loci as a means of delivering some form of racially specific disease. Put simply a designer plague which affects only, let's say, Caucasians, or Chinese, or whatever. Maybe even more specific than that. Suppose the Iranians were thinking along those lines. Or Quatermain himself, if he has delusions of world domination. This has serious military implications. We need to have this technology before some maniac towel head in a desert biology lab gets to it. Or we need to take it out altogether, even if that means destroying the Trikos Group."

"Quatermain is not some kind of megalomaniac," said Wavell angrily, "I know about this guy. I've studied him in detail. That's why I deployed Throckmorton to protect him and his family. Quatermain is still a seventies hippy. He still believes in love and peace. He is

essentially a good man in an evil world. Nevertheless, if what you say he is doing is true, I have to agree that our real nightmare is that someone finds out how to pervert his science before we do. Let's face it. We all know that we've been letting anodyne diseases loose on the public at large just to see how fast they spread. There are conspiracy theorists out there who believe that AIDS is a designer disease gone wrong."

"AIDS was a necessary intervention," Lange hissed, "it was intended to keep the population down in Africa and hit those bastard gays and people who fuck around. It's God's way of making us live decent lives. Read your Bible professor Meredith! Read your Bible!"

Barbas nodded in agreement. Wavell scowled at both of them. There had been many times when he wished that he had stayed an obscure university professor instead of renting out his brain to monsters.

"You're a bunch of assholes," Wavell snapped, "do we live in a world where no one can do good?"

"Scientists are not responsible for the uses to which their inventions are put," replied Barbas, "and neither is Drew Quatermain. If he has something we can use as a biogenetic weapon then we want it, soon as. And incidentally we also want to know what the Altair project is. There's plenty of scientific literature on Quatermain's ARK project. Though why he's cataloguing all known genomes is beyond us. But we know nothing about the Altair project except that it involves building totally revolutionary biological supercomputers using nanotechnology. That's fucking dangerous. We'd like to know about that too. And why is he building these underwater hotels? What does he want nuclear submarines for? Does he know something that we don't know? What is the fucker up to?"

"I'd like to know about that too," Wavell said wearily and with more than a hint of concern. But at least these idiots had not drawn one of the obvious conclusions about Quatermain's activities.

"Are you entirely sound, Professor Meredith?" Lange said menacingly, "perhaps we should look into your clearances. If Drew Quatermain has developed such a technology, we want it as a matter of national urgency. If you can't deliver, then we'll use other means before someone else does. Now; where are his weakest points?"

Wavell hesitated. He knew very little about Drew Quatermain's associates but his conscience had already sided with them and he was reluctant to deliver them to colleagues whose motives could never really be trusted. On the other hand they already had Throckmorton's reports, and they could easily draw their own conclusions.

"I would say," he began, "the kids who are outside the fold. Lucinda

Scott Hannay, Nikos and Ayesha Scott. That's where I'm looking, anyway. The parents are much harder to get at. Though not impossible." He thought of what Graves had said about them all gathering at Marcus Scott's country house in North Yorkshire on Christmas Day. That, too, had been in one of Throckmorton's report. He said nothing about that and hoped that they hadn't spotted it.

Lange looked at Barbas, then back to Wavell.

"Throckmorton's got two weeks. If we don't get some positive result orientated intelligence by then we'll go to plan B. Understood?"

Wavell pulled a puzzled face and sucked on his teeth. The interview was over. On his way out of the Langley labyrinth he was accosted by a breathless Colonel Anstruther who intercepted him at the intersection of two corridors.

"Tell your guy to be very careful," he whispered, holding Wavell's arm tightly, "Lange is a God freak. He goes to church on Sunday and prays for his soul. And on Monday he goes into his office and has folks killed. He has no doubts. He's on a mission. And don't count on two weeks. Two days is more like. Lange's got his own agenda and he ain't waiting for you. The bastard thinks that Quatermain is plotting to let loose a zombie bug and take over the universe! He wants him dead!"

When he got back to New York Wavell tried to contact Mike Throckmorton but Mike was not responding to e-mails and his cellphone was switched off. Until he switched it on and replied to Wavell's coded text on the secure line it would not be possible to update him and warn him of the threat he faced.

CHAPTER 8

Mike Throckmorton stood outside the imposing front door of a very grand house in a very grand terrace of twenty houses overlooking Regent's Park. The houses were pristine white with elegant windows protected by metal grills and guarded by alarms and CCTV cameras. At each end of the terrace, and in the centre, were larger houses fronted with Greek temple columns surmounted with blue and white tympanums and topped with statues. Several of the houses had blue plaques indicating that someone of note had once lived there. H G Wells had died at number 13 in 1946 and the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams died at number 10 in 1958. But now everyone who lived here was someone of note, though not always for the right reasons. This terrace was for the seriously rich. He was still not sure what to expect, but that was what his job was about. Dealing with the unexpected. He rang the bell. The door was opened by a stocky man in a dark suit. He handed the man the note that had appeared in his pigeon post and the bar coded plastic card which was inserted into a hand held reader.

"Dr Michael Throckmorton," the security man said.

Mike nodded.

"You are expected. This way sir."

Mike entered the hallway and followed the security guard down the hall and through another security door which opened into a larger hallway with a grand staircase.

"Upstairs," the guard said, "turn right at the top of the stairs. Knock at the first door." The guard grinned at him, as though familiar with an undisclosed secret. Mike climbed the stairs on his own. At the first doorway he stopped and gave a discreet knock. The door was opened by a tall, willowy girl with long jet black hair, a classic upper middle class Sloane face, striking violet purple eyes and a big grin. She was also stark naked. Through the door Mike could see more naked people standing around talking to each other. He stepped back. This was not what he had expected.

"It's okay," the girl said, "first time is always a bit of a shock. You are?"

"Mike Throckmorton. I'm expected."

"You wouldn't be here if you weren't. Do you want to park your clothes and have a shower? I'm Amethyst, by the way."

Mike thought a shower might be wise. He was a little sweaty from travelling, and if it was going to be this kind of party it would be better to be clean. He nodded.

“Follow me then,”

He was led down another corridor into a large bedroom around which were dotted neat piles of clothes ranging from the full kit of Barbour and brogues, to the solitary fur coat and Jimmy Choo shoes in which one adventurous lady had done a *Butterfield 8* to the party. Amethyst watched him undress, taking in the saturnine face, the broad shoulders, the smooth and sinuous six packed body, tiny rounded bottom and the well hung and already erect penis projecting from a thick tangle of black pubes. Mike was vain enough not to question her attention and looked forward to returning it if the opportunity arose.

“Oh, yes,” Amethyst said quietly, “the opportunity will certainly arise. You are definitely going on my dance card. But first you have to dance with someone else.”

Mike looked up, startled. How had she known what he was thinking? Then he remembered his briefings and his discussion with Adrian Graves. These people really were something else. He was getting closer and he was going to have to be very careful to conceal his thoughts.

“Fine by me, babe,” he replied, “I can give as good as I get.”

She led him out of the bedroom into the luxurious en suite wet room and watched him shower, but made no attempt to take advantage of his very obvious erection. Instead she leant against the bathroom door, still grinning, and still admiring the gorgeously athletic body. When Mike had finished, she handed him a towel and helped him dry himself.

“Good looking body, though,” she said, “You could have me now if you want. But, as I said, the first dance it already spoken for, so I suppose I should wait my turn.”

“I suppose so,” Mike replied in answer to the second question, and unsure of how long he was going to be able to dance. He'd had group sex often enough, usually with a couple of buddies and a few horny girls. But he'd never been to a swingers party. Nothing like this. He suddenly felt overawed.

“Dancing is not a problem,” Amethyst laughed, “some of us can keep you dancing until you scream for mercy.” He followed her down the silent, deep carpeted corridors, his erection suddenly so hard that it was almost painful. “See what I mean,” she continued to laugh. “Now. There are certain rules. First, The girls can say no. The girls will come to you. You cannot go to them. Be a gentleman. There's plenty of choice. Anyway, every girl here will want to screw a hunk like you. Secondly, HIV is not a problem, we've all been inoculated and once you've kissed one of us you will be too. And we're all on the pill, so you don't need to use a condom but there are condoms scattered around if you want one. Thirdly, any girl wearing a thong is not up for penetrative sex. But

they'll do the other things. If they fancy you. Lastly, there is alcoholic drink but you won't get drunk, and there are no drugs. This party is about sex and socialising. Nothing else. Okay."

Amethyst had one of those cut glass upper middle class accents unique to ladies from Cheltenham College and the like. Mike was out of his depth socially, if not sexually.

"You'll be surprised," she said, "there are some beautiful men here tonight, and gorgeous girls." She pushed him into the room.

Mike gasped with astonishment. The room was very dimly lit and at first all he could see was a circle of superb backs, small bottoms, slim hips and long legs. Firmly toned athletic young bodies, about eighteen of them, mostly female, standing in a loose circle watching something happening in the centre. Over the heads of the naked onlookers Mike could just see a very tall man who appeared to be holding a girl upside down by her calves. He insinuated himself through the yielding ranks of flesh, soft and fragrant, and, as his own naked skin brushed against the parting flesh of the girls, he felt again that slight static tingle, and those that he touched turned and looked at him and smiled, as though recognising him as a kindred spirit.

From the front of the circle he could see what was happening. Between the man's legs was a young woman, upside down, supporting her weight on the carpet with her shoulders and elbows so that her crotch was wedged into his. She was twisted slightly at right angles to the man, with one leg behind him and one in front, both held aloft by the man's hands gripped tightly round her calves. The man was leaning forward and thrusting down into her. The girl was in paroxysms of ecstasy, alternating groaning and squealing with delight. And the girl was Dr Lucy Scott Hannay.

"She's good, isn't she," Amethyst had come up behind Mike. She was tall enough to rest her chin against his shoulder so that her breasts nestled against his back. Mike felt again that intimate shock but all his attention was focussed on the sexual gymnasts performing in the centre of the circle. This was another Lucy Hannay. Not the hostile blue stocking of the Comus but an unbelievably beautiful woman with one hell of a sex drive. She had fooled him pretty successfully. Amethyst felt another hand on her shoulder and turned round, pulling Mike with her.

"Time for you to meet your host," she said, "this is Nikos Scott."

Mike turned. Nikos Scott was average height, long dark wavy hair and grey eyes. Mike recognised him from the photos in his files.

"Good evening Dr Throckmorton, and welcome to my party. I'm Nikos, Lucy's half brother."

Nikos extended his hand to Mike. He took it with his customary crushing American grip and winced as a lightning bolt shock surged through him. For an instant Nikos Scott was in his mind. Then the hands parted and he was gone. Mike began to be seriously alarmed. What was going on here had nothing to do with the Corporate Intelligence Service. This was an orgy with an edge, and the edge was frightening. He felt the butt clenching fear of a holy man who had strayed into a coven of witches.

“Lucy is right about you,” Nikos said quietly, “you are the first one we have met. All of the girls here have some empathic sensitivity. That’s why they’re here. Amethyst is quite strong aren’t you sweetie,” Amethyst kissed Nikos, “but apart from me none of the men here tonight have your power. You are very rare.”

There was a sudden orgasmic scream from the centre of the circle, and a round of applause. The gymnastics were over. The circle dispersed, some to talk, some to lead each other to the sofas and beds which were strategically placed around the room, or to the bedrooms which were available for those who wanted more privacy.

The little group around Nikos was joined firstly by a petite dark haired girl with high cheekbones and classic Middle Eastern face, and then by Lucy, flushed and panting. She flung her arms around Mike and kissed him passionately, her tongue searching his mouth, her breasts pressed hard against his chest.

“Bet you can’t do that,” she giggled, rubbing her amazing body against him, “your turn next.” She looked at Amethyst who looked back expectantly, “and you can have Nikos while you’re waiting,” she grinned.

“Yesha and I can have Nikos anytime,” Amethyst replied, putting her arm round Ayesha’s small shoulders and hugging her, “we’ll wait for the hunk.”

Ayesha nodded, smiled and looked curiously at Mike, but said nothing. Behind the smile Mike detected an anxiety, as though this woman held a secret which she did not dare to divulge to her companions.

Lucy smiled, “Now, Mike,” she said, “you wanted to meet my family. Here they are.”

“And this is my wife Yesha, who I love beyond belief,” Nikos introduced the small dark girl whose beauty was so profound that in the world her dead Persian mother had left she would have been condemned to a life beneath the veil. Here she stood naked in front of people she hardly knew, and she treated them with sublime composure. Yesha held out her hand and Mike accepted it and felt yet again that surge of

energy which rattled around in his consciousness. But this time it was different. For an instant he looked into a infinite kaleidoscope of possibilities, as though past, present and future were held together in one instant. This was a mystery far more intriguing than Drew Quatermain's financial empire. Ayesha Scott was a miniature goddess, more beautiful than any woman he had ever met. Moreover, she could see the future, and the immediate future she saw was dire. So dire that she was too terrified to reveal it to her siblings.

"More beautiful than me?" Lucy laughed. Mike felt again that primal chill of fear, like a mortal man in the presence of a tangible ghost. She too knew what he was thinking. "Don't worry about it," Lucy continued, "just let it happen. Come with me."

She took his hand and led him out of the drawing room up one flight of stairs to a sumptuous bedroom which was not festooned with discarded clothes. Mike could not take his eyes off the fabulous body. This was one hell of a babe. Young, sexy as hell, and hot for him. He could not believe his luck. He debated whether to use his accustomed tactic of flinging the girl onto her back, pinning her down and rogering her without mercy, but before he had time for the thought to take effect he found himself kneeling on the huge bed with Lucy facing him, also kneeling.

"Give me your hands," she said, holding out her own hands towards him. For some reason he could not bring himself to look into her face. His attention was entirely focussed on the firm athletic breasts and the fully waxed dream between her thighs, still glistening wet from its last encounter. He took the proffered hands.

"Listen to me," Lucy said, "listen to me. Close your eyes."

Mike obeyed.

"Listen to me," her voice was fading, "listen to your soul. Listen to the silence of your soul."

Mike began to struggle. This was not what he had expected. He had come here to fuck this woman, not to be hypnotised by her. But he could not resist. His grasp on his rational consciousness began to slip away. Tiny filigrees of the palest blue light wound their way into his mind, as though he was a patient, paralysed but conscious on an operating table, feeling every incision of the subtlest knife as the surgeon opened up his brain and extracted his innermost secrets from it. There was nothing he could do. The mind that was within him had uncovered all his secrets, his licentious personality, his mission to infiltrate the family of Drew Quatermain, Wavell Meredith, the Corporate Intelligence Service, the uncertain evil which lurked in his heart. Not evil gained but good lost, beaten out of his juvenile soul by

his zealous Lutheran father.

He awoke. Lucy was looking at him solemnly, digesting what she had just extracted from his mind. He struggled to meet her face to face but still could not bring himself to look into her eyes. She raised herself up, still kneeling and moved closer to him then let herself down onto his dick, expertly guiding him into her. He felt the sudden shock of entry, that delirious thrill of penetrating another body and conquering it. Her arms folded round him and she kissed him with fiery passion. Only this was different. He had done this with many women, but it had always been two bodies doing their own thing for their own pleasure. This time it was not just his own body. She was in his mind again, and he was in hers. Everything that she felt, he could feel, and everything that he felt was channelled back to him through her perception of it. For the first time in his life he felt what it was like to be a woman being penetrated by a man. The ecstasy was indescribable. They had become one body and one soul.

In this position he could hardly move. Lucy was doing all the work. Not the thrusting rumpy pumpy he had so recently enjoyed with Astrid and Charlotte but sex which was almost tantric in its immobility. Their bodies were static, pinned together, but inside her vagina Lucy was using her muscles to manipulate his dick with such subtlety that he screamed out with the pain and pleasure of it. She held him back longer than he could have imagined possible. When he did come the universe exploded in a mind bursting paroxysm of light and colour and at the apex of his orgasm, his mind stopped. His heart stopped. Time stopped. Mike Throckmorton died.

His consciousness spiralled into a black pit and hurtled downwards on a trajectory outside of time. But not alone. Those tendrils of intertwined blue light travelled with him and their presence reassured him. At intervals on this roller coaster ride into oblivion he seemed to pass way stations. Brief flashes of light, like floors glimpsed from the little window of a plunging elevator and on each floor was an encapsulated life. It was as though he was falling back in time through all the lives he had once lived. He wanted to scream, to call out, but his vocal chords were nightmare paralysed. It began to dawn on him that he was outside his body. He had no sensation, no vision or feeling, only that fleeting perception of other lives as his soul briefly engaged with the souls it had once shared and through whose senses it had once experienced their material worlds. Then the soul came to rest.

He was holding his daughter's hand, leading his fellows to the clearing where the Others met in their mysterious circle. No one knew what the Others were. They had already been here thousands of years

when his kind had first come from the warmth to colonise these distant forests. Over countless millennia his people had retreated in front of the ice and then returned as the glaciers melted and the Earth reawakened. And whenever they returned the Others were always there. Waiting to greet them with their unconditional love. But in the last ice age their way towards the sun had been blocked by new creatures who had come out of the great land of the South. Like them, but taller and slimmer, with flatter faces, narrow noses and less body hair. Like the Others.

They had weapons, spears with sharpened flints, and they killed for pleasure. His people also had flint knives and spears, but they killed only to eat, and loved and revered the animals that gave their lives to them so that they could live. The new ones also had speech and language which clouded their purity of thought so that their minds could not communicate either with each other or with the Great Spirit which embraced all life. In the face of their violence his own people had returned to the cold North. Now the ice had gone and they lived in caves at the base of the cliffs. There was a pool fed by a waterfall, and a river, and dense woodland. And beyond the woodland was a great plain. It was warmer here, much warmer. The ice and its peripheral tundra much further away. Here trees and plants grew. Food was abundant. Fruit, and berries, and wild animals and fish speared from the rivers. The thick furs with which they had kept out the cold were no longer necessary. The Others had already shed their soft leather cloaks and went naked in the woods as was their custom. But his people covered their genitalia with loin clothes and wore fur cloaks as though ashamed of their coarse bodies and fearful to presume the sacred nakedness of the Others.

The Others. The Others had always cared for them. Healing their sick, consoling them in death and speaking to their minds with the voice of the Great Spirit who gave life to all creatures. Where they came from he did not know. They were a mystery. The fireside storytellers who carried forward the past of his people spoke of a race of gods who slept in great caves beneath the glacial ice, returning to the world when the glaciers retreated and life returned. But that was long ago, in a time before memory. Now the Others lived beside them and travelled with them to the hot lands when the ice returned. His race knew them now as ancient spirits of the forest who loved all life and cared for it without expectation of reverence or reward.

He looked back at his brother, walking behind him. His brother was like him, squat and hairy, with a massive head, eyes set in craggy sockets overhung by bony eyebrows, broad flat nose, strong arms, sturdy simian legs. Light brown skin clothed in hair so thick that in places it

was almost like fur. They had evolved to live in the cold climate at the edge of the glaciers. Mike stood outside the mind his consciousness occupied. He recognised these creatures. They were Neanderthals, early humans who had become extinct over thirty thousand years ago. Who, he wondered, were the Others.

He knew that the anatomically modern humans who had come out of Africa had coexisted beside Neanderthals for about ten thousand years, before the Neanderthals had disappeared. Were these creatures humans, or some alternative species of *homo sapiens sapiens* which had developed independently in the Northern Hemisphere? And what was the nature of their symbiotic relationship with the Neanderthals? He allowed his consciousness to merge again with the mind it shared. He could see everything it saw. Feel everything it felt. What surprised him was that this was a mind much more subtle and perceptive than the coarse body it occupied. A mind which could talk to other minds and could feel the mysterious quantum energy which surrounded it. An ape mind which shared a small part of the consciousness of these elvish creatures who were about to take his daughter. Who were they? The Neanderthal didn't know. They had always been here, that was all it knew.

He looked affectionately at his daughter. She was not like her father. Her form and physique was almost that of a twenty first century human, virtually without body hair, except in the groin and the armpits, and she shared her form with her mother, and most of the females who were joined in the Great Circle. This was an ancient ceremony, an act of love and an act of dedication. Apes and Angels who had coexisted for thousands of years. He had nothing to fear from them. Each daughter was given first to the Others. And if she bore female children they would usually be twins and they would look like the Others. But male children of the Others were rare beyond belief. No male in this group shared the blood of the Others. Except for him.

Outwardly he was like his companions. But his mind was different. He alone could sense the subtle infinite minds of the Others and understood their intent. And he alone could interpret between them and his people. He was their shaman, their prophet and their guide, and he led them with the ancient wisdom which the Others carried to him from the Great Spirit. The gross creatures stood reverentially, forming an outer circle around the Others. There were more of these god like creatures in the forest, though far fewer since the lethal creatures from the South had appeared. They were hard to tell apart because they all looked alike, and they always appeared to their primitive followers in groups of nine, three males and six females, kneeling in a circle, naked, beautiful.

Mike's human consciousness recalled an old faery poem which flowed unbidden into his mind. *How beautiful they are, the lordly ones, Who dwell in the hills, In the hollow hills. They have faces like flowers, And their breath is the wind that stirs amid the grasses. Filled with white clover. Their limbs are more white than shafts of moonshine. They are more fleet than the March wind. They laugh and are glad and are terrible: When their lances shake, every green reed quivers. How beautiful they are. How beautiful the lordly ones. In the hollow hills.*

Only these lordly ones were not white. Not brown or black either, but golden bronze, as though they were eternally sunburned. Creatures of the light. Children of the sun which had made them what they were. A female, beautiful beyond belief, walked slowly towards him, her face radiant, her hands held out towards the child woman he clutched to himself. It was painful to let her go like this. But it was customary, and the Others gave them so much in return and asked for nothing else. The female's face was familiar to Mike from his photographs, and its soul was instantly recognisable. The face was the fine boned Mediterranean face of Imogen and Sophie Devenish, and of Ayesha Quatermain. But the soul was that of Lucy Hannay.

He released his daughter, who looked back at him plaintively, then obediently took the hand of the female and was led back into the circle. Then the Circle re-formed. He watched the simple ceremony over the heads of the kneeling Others, their long jet black hair flowing down their flawless backs, their great eyes, deep, dark and shining, their bodies small and delicate, their arms extended, long slim fingers intertwined to make the circle complete. Three males were kneeling, flanked by females on either side who held hands to complete the circle. Two of the kneeling males had been mounted by females who leaned back until their heads met in the centre of the circle. The third male, erect, waited for the daughter.

She stood in front of him, a half creature, neither Neanderthal nor human, slipped out of her soft fur cloak, and lowered herself gently onto him as she had been told to do. He put his arms round her and hugged her to his chest, stroking her hair. His mind whispered to her and comforted her. Mike's consciousness merged once again with that of his shaman host. Through him he could feel the strength of the male penetrating his daughter and the overwhelming love that flowed from him, soothing her brief pain. Love of life and love of all living creatures, and hope for an uncertain future.

The rational mind that still hovered at the back of Mike's consciousness knew what was happening. Mike was a geneticist by training. These creatures with the bodies of modern humans had come

here long before the African humans had reached the North. They were a different species, a doomed mutation evolved thousands of years before their time. Now they were dying out, taking with them their unique ability to share each other's consciousness and communicate without speech. And they were impregnating generations of female Neanderthals to try to preserve some of the genetic material which made them so different from all the other species of humanity that had been before, or would come in the future. The offspring of each generation would be incrementally more like the Others. They were laying the foundations for their own return, but it would take millennia before chance would reunite their genetic remnants, and during those aeons *homo sapiens sapiens* would rule the earth and rape it to death. The Neanderthal females who issued from this symbiosis had been genetically changed and when *cro-Magnon* man came out of Africa these beautiful women would be seen as desirable and would survive, interbreeding with the first modern humans and passing on their immutable mitochondrial DNA into new bodies and a new species. It was a strategy for genetic survival. Angels surrendering themselves to apes in the hope of rebirth in the future.

His daughter leaned back until her long dark hair mingled with the hair of the two women already stretched out to the centre of the Circle. She reached back behind her head and grasped their hands. The circle was complete. Three sinuous spokes in a wheel of life. Echoes of the energy which flowed through it reverberated in his mind. Nothing moved. This sex was static. All in the mind. But the end would be just as orgasmic. He could feel the ecstasy in his daughter's body. She was moving towards her climax. Exquisite pain and pleasure shared within one soul and with all the numinous souls of the Others holding hands in the unity of the Circle. He felt the exultation of the male as he burst into his daughter. Both bodies screamed with pleasure. Both souls cried out with joy. Both souls united in an act of love which rippled round the Circle and cascaded outwards to the crude creatures gathered to watch. And amongst them the women who shared the blood of the Others felt the same ecstasy and rejoiced in it. But he alone of the males could feel what the women felt. He was unique amongst his fellows. *Darkly wise and rudely great.*

Mike cried out with the intensity of the shared pleasure and fell forward through time into the arms of Lucy Hannay. Ice blue eyes caressed him. He forced himself to look into her face. The face was calm, gentle, reassuring. She lifted her hand and touched his cheek, stroking it affectionately.

"Lucy was right about you," she said, "you are one of us. But you

are not like us. Not exactly. And where did you go to? We've never been to that place."

Mike banged his fist against the side of his head to try to dislodge the bee which was buzzing in his brain.

"What in God's name happened?" he panted. His heart was racing, sweat poured down his face.

"You went back in time. We have many lives and unlike humans our souls remain conscious when we die. Or rather, our souls return to where they came from, so we can revisit our memories of past lives. You went back a very long way. We've never been that far back before. You are something very special."

She had disengaged her body from him and now knelt in front of him, their knees just touching. She continued to stroke his cheek and looked questioningly into his face as though still uncertain of him. Mike started to cry with great breathless sobs. He had never cried in his life, not even as a child when his father had beaten him until his back ran with blood. Now he felt that he had been a party to a great mystery and it shook him to the core.

"How," he sobbed, "how did it happen?"

"The ancient Greeks believed that in moments of extreme passion the soul leaves the body. *Ekstasis* they called it. It can happen when we share our orgasms, or we come near to death. It is a kind of little death which momentarily frees us from the bonds of flesh. Sex and death are crucial to our ability to free our souls. We're a bit like vampires. We feed on sex. It empowers us. And it unlocks the powers of those who are like us."

Mike shook his head in which a distant giant bell was reverberating.

"I don't understand," he muttered, "what in hell is going on here?"

She stroked his cheek again.

"Did you feel that," she said, "that tingle, like static?"

He nodded. She leaned forward and pressed her naked flesh against his chest.

"And that?"

Mike nodded again. It felt as though a piece of charged silk had earthed itself against his skin. The sensation was indescribable and whilst it lasted he was part of her, and she of him.

"More intense isn't it. It's as though there is an electrical field around our bodies. When we are naked there is no obstruction to it. It connects directly with the cosmic energy which preserves our souls. When we hold each other our bodies and minds become one. We share our consciousness, and enter the consciousness of the universe. And when we enter each other we enter infinity."

"I still don't understand," he looked plaintively at the beautiful woman kneeling opposite him, "this doesn't make any kind of sense. It's totally irrational."

"Neither did we when we first discovered it. And it's only in the last three years that we've learned the truth. And I haven't experienced anything remotely like what we just did since I unlocked Marcus Scott over thirty years ago, and that was in a full Square of Three. You are only the third man we have ever found who fully shares our powers. Not counting Nikos, who's only a kid."

"Thirty years?" Mike continued to look puzzled. He lifted up his face and confronted the ice blue eyes, "you're not Lucy, are you. You're...."

"No, I'm not Lucy. I'm Caroline. I'm Lucy's mother. You know me, of course. You have a file on me. And you have photographs of me. And now I know everything about you. Lucy is irrationally hostile to you. She refused to make love to you. She thinks you're evil. She's like I was at her age. She doesn't want to believe that any of this is possible. It flies in the face of reason. But it's there, and you are too important to be entrusted to her. You've never looked properly at Lucy have you. Lucy has grey eyes. Otherwise we are the same. I had to stop you from seeing my eyes. "

"Why? For God's sake, what's happening to me."

"You're changing. I told you we were like vampires. I've given you a kind of disease. If you are truly like us you will change. If you are not like us, then nothing will happen to you and you will forget what happened here."

Mike grabbed Caroline's arm and twisted it so that she winced with the pain.

"Lady," Mike snarled, "I need some fucking answers. Now!"

"Let go of my arm," the icy eyes looked into his soul, "Lucy was right about one thing. There is violence in you. Now, let go of me."

"Like hell I will," he twisted her arm until she screamed.

Next thing he was lying on his back on the floor on the other side of the room nursing a very sore head.

"I warned you," Caroline said quietly, "you are not like us. You have great power. But remember. The men may have the power, but it is the women who know how to use it. I can use your power against you. Never, ever, threaten me again."

Mike opened his mouth to protest but was interrupted by a sudden and frantic hammering at the bedroom door. A panic stricken Amethyst was shouting.

"Caroline," she shouted, "Caroline, the police are here. They've arrested Nikos and Yesha. Caroline, come quickly."

Mike's mind filled with a multitude of unanswered questions, not the least of which was how Lucy's fifty year old mother could look like Lucy's identical twin sister. But there was not going to be any more time for questions. Caroline leapt off the bed, opened a wardrobe, put on a kimono and flung a dressing gown at him.

"Come on," she repeated, "something is seriously wrong."

CHAPTER 9

In the drawing room the bodies which had so proudly paraded their naked lasciviousness were now cowering in a corner trying to cover themselves with anything that came to hand, from silk cushions to open copies of *Country Life*. The room was brightly lit now so that nothing was concealed. Three smirking uniformed policemen stood by the door watching two plainclothes officers putting handcuffs on Nikos and Ayesha. Ayesha was crying.

“What is going on here?” Caroline demanded quietly.

The older of the two plainclothes men turned to her, looked at Mike, and then back to Caroline.

“And you are?”

“I am Professor Caroline Scott Hannay,” Caroline replied, “what are you doing to Mr and Mrs Scott?”

The policeman looked at her with blank disbelief.

“Bit young for a professor aren’t you?”

Caroline shrugged, “I look after myself,” she replied.

“I should say so,” the officer smirked, “but we do have a warrant for the arrest of Mr and Mrs Scott on charges of Anti Social Behaviour, namely, running a disorderly house. The neighbours have complained.”

“I doubt that very much,” Caroline snapped, “this is a private party. No laws are being broken here. And for God’s sake, give them some clothes. What are you thinking about.”

“On the contrary,” he replied, “laws are being broken. Some of the people here have paid money to enjoy the services of these ladies,” he gestured at the cowering bodies.

“I don’t think so,” Caroline replied, “these guests are here by invitation. No one has paid anything. No crime has been committed here. This is a private party.”

“Well, that’s as maybe, but we are required to expedite the warrant. We will take them back to the station and question them there.”

“May I see the warrant please?”

The policeman handed Caroline the warrant and as he did so their fingers touched. Caroline frowned. The warrant appeared to be authentic.

She sighed and handed the warrant back. “Well, for Christ’s sake let them get dressed. You can’t drag them out of here stark naked. Let them go and get dressed. And you don’t need to handcuff them. They won’t run away.”

The plainclothes man looked at one of the uniformed officers. He nodded. The handcuffs were unlocked. Ayesha ran to Caroline who put

her arms round her and hugged her.

“Do as they say,” Caroline said to her, “it’ll be alright, just do what they ask.” But while the words conveyed one message their minds conveyed another.

Ayesha turned to the policeman. “I’d like to go to the bedroom,” she said, “to get my clothes. And some clothes for Nikos.”

One of the uniformed policemen followed Ayesha upstairs to her bedroom where she picked up a pair of knickers, a blouse and pair of jeans from the bed. The policeman continued to stare at her.

“Can I get dressed in private?” Ayesha began to sob.

“Not very private down there,” the policeman replied, “anyway, I’ve already seen everything you’ve got to offer. Lovely tits and a nicely waxed pussy. Yummy. I could give you one.”

“I’m going to the toilet,” Ayesha sobbed, and, before he could prevent her, Ayesha was in the ensuite bathroom and had locked the door.

“Fucking come out of there,” the policeman yelled, “or I’ll fucking break your fucking neck.”

Two minutes later the toilet flushed and Ayesha reappeared, dressed now in the blouse and jeans. She picked up a T shirt and another pair of jeans from the floor by the bed. Then the policeman grabbed her by the arm and frogmarched her back to the drawing room. She handed the clothes to Nikos who was released from the handcuffs and allowed to dress. He too came to Caroline and she hugged and kissed him. Once again their minds merged for an instant. Nikos nodded.

“Okay, auntie Caroline,” he whispered, “okay. I understand.”

The uniformed officers, took their arms and walked them out of the room, followed by Caroline and Mike. The other partygoers fled to the bedroom where their clothes were stacked, and prepared to leave as quickly as possible. At the front door the two security guards apologised to Caroline.

“They had warrants, Professor Hannay,” said the senior guard, “we couldn’t stop them.”

“It’s okay,” Caroline said, “contact Trikos security. The code word is Persephone.”

Caroline and Mike stood on the steps of the house and watched Nikos and Ayesha being bundled into an unmarked police car. Then they were gone. Mike followed her back up the stairs to the drawing room. Whatever was happening he did not intend to miss it. As they went up the grand staircase they passed the expelled innocents making their way out of Eden. In the drawing room Amethyst, who appeared to be a permanent house guest, had also found a kimono and was waiting for

them.

“What’s happening?” she asked, tears trickling from the violet eyes.

“I don’t know,” Caroline replied, “I’m going to go to Marylebone Police station and check this out. You stay here and hold the fort. If Drew Quatermain rings tell him what’s happened and tell him where I’ve gone. I’ll be back soon. You,” she turned to Mike, a questioning look on her face, “you stay with me. You wanted to meet Lucy’s family. Well now you’re going to have your chance. Just stay with me. I may need you.”

Mike said nothing. He was still trying to figure out what Caroline had done to him in the bedroom, and worrying about what disease she had given him. He didn’t feel any different. But something had happened. He could sense it. Either she was a consummate hypnotist or something very strange was going on. In the mews at the back of the house was the Aston Martin he had seen at Keele. It dawned on him that the Lucy he had watched from the window of Astrid’s room had probably not been Lucy at all. He had been comprehensively duped. He resented it. These people were playing games with him. Sooner or later he would turn the tables. Nevertheless, for the time being he would continue to fulfil his mission and stay as close to Caroline as possible. He got into the car and kept his mouth shut.

At Marylebone Police Station Caroline was faced with a desk sergeant who looked at her with baffled incredulity.

“There is no record of any warrant issued against Mr and Mrs Scott,” he said, “of Hanover Terrace. If we were making an arrest in Hanover Terrace we would certainly know about it. Maybe they weren’t from this station.”

“Can you check?” said Mike, intervening for the first time.

The sergeant looked at the computer screen. “There are no outstanding warrants for these people. I’m sorry. Maybe Special Branch? You won’t get anything out of them.”

Caroline said nothing. She was not surprised. Her brief contact with the arresting policeman had suggested that he was not genuine. The trip to Marylebone was merely to confirm her suspicion. Nikos and Ayesha had been kidnapped. Drew Quatermain would already be on a plane from wherever he was.

“Do you want to report them as missing?” the sergeant asked.

Caroline pondered the question. If they had been kidnapped and there was going to be a demand for money the kidnappers would not want the police involved. In any case Drew’s own security people were much better equipped to deal with this than the police, and, if Ayesha had done what she had suggested, they would at least know where they were

being held. She shook her head.

"Not yet," she said, "there may be another explanation. A jape, maybe."

The policeman shrugged, "as you wish," he said.

Back in the drawing room in Hanover Terrace she turned to Mike accusingly.

"What do you know about this?" she demanded. Mike shrank from the ferocity of her voice.

"Nothing," he replied, "why should I know anything?"

"You work for the American Government. You have been sent to spy on us. There must be a reason."

"I work for the Corporate Intelligence Service. I'm tasked with watching you, and protecting you, if necessary."

"Why?"

"We think you're in danger. That's all. I'm supposed to protect you."

"Well you're not doing very well are you. Is Corporate Intelligence affiliated to the CIA?" her tone was still menacing.

Mike hesitated. He genuinely did not know whether the CIS was affiliated, but he did know that Wavell Meredith talked about the big boys upstairs, and he had himself been given weapons and combat training in the company of guys who definitely did work for the CIA. It was entirely possible. Probable even. He shrugged. It was pointless trying to conceal anything from these women, if they really could read his mind.

"The CIS is a subdepartment of Homeland Security. But... I don't know. It's possible that our reports are passed to the CIA, if something interests them," he said weakly. Caroline grabbed his hand and once again he felt his mind invaded by an irresistible force. In an instant it was gone.

"You're telling the truth, so far as you know what the truth is," Caroline replied more gently, "you can't be all bad."

"I'd really like some answers," Mike said in a more conciliatory tone, "I think I'm entitled. Why does Lucy think I'm evil? And what disease have you given me?"

"Sorry," Caroline replied, "I can answer the first. But not the second. Not yet. But don't worry about it. It's not life threatening. Quite the opposite, if you really are one of us. If I tell you and it doesn't happen you're going to be very disappointed."

"Okay. Why am I evil?"

"There is no such thing as evil," Caroline replied, "only an absence of good. You are a vain, dishonest, violent and predatory man. But those are common human vices from which you can be redeemed. Especially

if you are not really human. They may even be useful, as your employers obviously believe they are. You were sent here because you are good at seducing women. You think you can easily dominate women. And I can see why. You're a very good shag. Most girls are a pushover for you. Even Amethyst, who is intelligent enough to know better, has the hots for you. But we are not so easily dominated. You got nowhere with Lucy and you only had me because I let you. And you have no love in you. You have never loved, never been loved and do not know how to love. That is why she saw you as evil. Lucy goes out of her way to defy me and she tries not to think like me. But she does think like me and she is much stronger than me. If you wish to be with us you must learn to love as we do. And that means that you must love all of us. All, or nothing. You cannot serve two masters but you must ultimately serve many mistresses. You will have to choose. Given your devotion to your dick it shouldn't be a problem for you."

Amethyst came back into the room.

"Drew Quatermain wants everyone at Croxton," she said. "We stay here until the morning, just in case anything happens here. Then we take a chopper from City Airport. He's in Zurich."

"Okay," said Caroline, "there's nothing we can do here. Let's go to bed. You too Amethyst. You can help me see how long Mike can dance."

Amethyst was taken aback. It did not seem an appropriate response to a time of extreme anxiety. Caroline gripped her arm and looked into her startled eyes.

"Listen to me. We need to find out everything we can about him. When he's orgasmic his mind is wide open. He's like us, but he's not like us. There's something else. We need to find out what he is. Think of it as a kind of interrogation. Anyway, you fancy him don't you. He's a good shag. Believe me."

Amethyst gave a weak smile. Being in bed with Caroline and a hunky man would certainly be different, and Amethyst was young and had a great deal to learn from a consummate teacher. But Mike Throckmorton was also learning, and gave nothing away, except his dick which, he discovered, was not entirely under his control.

The following morning they flew to Yorkshire.

Lucy Hannay took John Pendle's arm and urged the apprehensive professor into the hotel bedroom. It was a very expensive hotel and the bedroom was large and luxurious and seductively dark. The door closed behind them. Pendle turned to Lucy and looked at her with desperation

in his eyes.

"I'm a Christian," he said, his voice shaking, "this is wrong."

Lucy took his lapels in her hands and pulled him towards her until he was close enough to smell the subtle fragrance of her perfume. When their bodies were touching she put her hands on either side of his face and kissed him with such tenderness that his soul melted.

"It's not wrong," Lucy replied, "your God is a God of love and the mysteries of love are found in the soul, not in the body. If we share our souls there is no sin in sharing our bodies."

"Do you believe in God, Lucy?" Pendle was torn between his faith and his body and his body was winning. He could feel his flesh stiffening and his soul merging with this unbelievably beautiful woman. And then there was curiosity. What were women really like? Would she be like the Playboy Bunnies whose discreetly airbrushed lasciviousness had gripped his adolescent imagination and pursued him into his virginal adult life. Lucy stepped back from him.

"No," she said, "I don't believe in God. What do you expect. My mother was a theologian. And anyway Gods are not susceptible to rational analysis. They rely on faith to make themselves invisible. I believe in reason. I have no faith in faith, only faith in reason. In the end so do you. You know as well as I do that physics cannot account for God. God is like the atom, intrinsically unknowable. William of Occam cracked that one in the fourteenth century."

"Then, why have you brought me here?" Pendle said lamely, sensing that he had already lost the battle but desperate to put up some kind of rearguard action.

"We came here to make love to each other," said Lucy, "I told you we would. Remember?" She began to unbutton his shirt, then stood back and looked at him expectantly. Pendle did not react. He continued to stand stock still, frozen in ethical ice. Lucy shrugged and began to unbutton her own blouse. To his horror John Pendle discovered that she did not wear a bra and what was being slowly and artfully revealed was beyond resistance.

"In 1972," Lucy continued, "my father came here with Sophie. To this very hotel and to this very room. I went to a lot of trouble to get this particular room. And they made love for the first time. Well, the first time for my father. My father was a bit like you. Uptight about sex. For Sophie it was far from her first time. But it was the first time she had made love to a man that she actually loved."

She finished unbuttoning her blouse and slipped it off her shoulders. John's breath was taken away, but still he did nothing. Lucy sighed, relieved him of his tweed sports jacket and continued to unbutton his

shirt. "I wanted to relive their experience with you. Just as it was for them. It was so beautiful for them. So beautiful. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Sophie?" John was beginning to enjoy this experience but still unable to respond as Lucy wanted him to because his mind was continuing to ask unnecessary questions, "who's Sophie? I thought your mother was called Caroline."

"My other mother," Lucy replied enigmatically. The time for talking was over. She pulled his shirt off his shoulders, pressed her small firm athletic breasts against his naked chest and began to kiss him. She felt his awakening soul release his arms from their moral straightjacket. Slowly they folded round her and pulled her more tightly to him. His mouth became more responsive. She ran her tongue round the edge of his lips then pushed it delicately into his mouth, playing with his tongue and teasing him. His hands strayed down her back and began to struggle with the waistband of her short skirt, trying to find some way of removing it. Lucy sighed again and unclipped the big fashion belt which secured her skirt. It fell away. She began to undo John's belt and met no resistance. The trousers fell to the floor. John Pendle was no American hunk. His body was skinny and angular and would never win prizes. But his brain was formidable, and it was his brain that Lucy loved.

He stood back from her and stared at her in total incomprehension. There was one final mystery. One ultimate secret. He put his hands on her hips. She made no resistance but looked back at him, a gentle smile flickering around her lips. He summoned all of his courage and pulled down the thong. Lucy stepped further back so that he could see everything. She kicked off her shoes and for the first time in his life John Pendle stared in awestruck fascination at a living naked woman. Then she knelt at his feet and reverentially removed his shoes and socks, then, looking up into his eyes, removed his boxer shorts. She stood up straight so that the two naked souls faced each other, revealing all the secrets of their flesh. Lucy, remembering what happened in James Sinclair's book, put her hands on John Pendle's shoulders and manoeuvred him backwards towards the bed.

Somewhere in Surrey Ayesha and Nikos were bundled out of the fake police car and into a large MPV with blacked out windows. Their arms were wrenched behind their backs and handcuffs snapped over their wrists. Hoods were pulled over their heads.

"Please don't," wailed Ayesha as it went totally dark. Her captors

laughed. One of them groped her. Her mind went out to Nikos.

"They aren't police are they," her thoughts sifted sluggishly into Nikos's confused consciousness.

"No. I don't think so. Caroline didn't think so."

"Darling Nikos. What are we going to do? I have seen this. They are going to torture us. They will kill you."

"Perhaps. But Caroline said do nothing. Drew will come for us. Drew will find us. Don't be frightened my love. They can't harm us. You know that. Your daddy will find us. Don't be frightened. Above all, we mustn't use our powers. Remember what Caroline said. Don't look into their minds. If they sense us looking it will send them mad. Then they will kill us."

"I've got a phone. I've hidden it. Like Caroline said."

"Is it a latitude tracker?"

Ayesha hesitated. Her uncertainty was palpable..

"Ayesha! Was it a tracker?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I think so. It was the little one that lives in the bathroom. Caroline said to switch off. So it doesn't ring and give itself away. Is that right?"

"Yes, I think so," Nikos reassured her and hoped that it was a standard issue tracking phone. The house was full of phones, but only those they took outside had the GPS transponder. How ironic that Lucy threw phones away with reckless abandon. Now, when he and Ayesha desperately needed a tracker phone, they probably didn't have one. An ordinary mobile would only connect to the network when it was switched on. And then it would only locate itself to its nearest cell. Even if it was switched on, finding them could take time.

Ayesha sensed his uncertainty. For telepaths deceit was impossible.

"I'm sorry," her mind whispered, *"I thought I was doing the right thing."*

"It'll be okay," Nikos caressed her soul, *"we'll be okay. We'll just have to get it out when we can and switch it on. Then they'll find us."*

Someone else got into the back of the MPV. Ayesha felt a strong hand grip her arm and push up her sleeve, and then the prick of a hypodermic needle.

"No, no," she screamed, *"no."* Her voice faded away, her mind detached itself from Nikos and folded into blackness. Minutes later Nikos followed her into the impenetrable dark.

When they woke they were sitting on steel chairs bolted to the floor of a hot windowless room. The walls and ceiling were lined with honeycomb foam sound deadening panels. The floor was covered in a soft resilient plastic material punctured by two large and strategically

placed drain holes. The hoods had been removed and both Ayesha and Nikos had been stripped. Their pinioned arms were stretched over the backs of the chairs and their handcuffs securely clipped to hooks welded to the chair frames, forcing them to sit in an uncomfortably upright stress position. There were other straps and shackles on the chair legs whose purpose left nothing to the imagination. On the far side of the room were benches and tool racks with knives and chisels, saws, screw clamps, electric drills, and a small gas blowlamp. Whatever this place was, it was not a British police station.

Both of them were woozy from the anaesthetic drug and they found it difficult either to speak or to make mental contact. She tried to look at Nikos but her head felt like lead and she could not lift it up. Nikos was the same. Someone came into the room.

“Good looking couple,” he said in an American accent to the man standing next to him, “foxy little lady, or what? Look at those tits.”

“Yeah, can’t wait to have her.”

“Little by little. We have to escalate this. The doc wants to experiment on them but he ain’t here yet and anyway we don’t take orders from him. So, while we wait for him, we keep them sedated and have a bit of fun with them. You know. Bit of Gonzo stuff, then, when they’re thoroughly broken, we try for the psychic thing. We’re supposed to video everything. For leverage.”

“What if they don’t play.”

“We’ll keep sending the videos. Quatermain isn’t going to let his daughter be abused indefinitely. And we can beat the shit out of the son in law. They want the whole thing shot now. Then we send them extracts. And then we start on the psychic tests. Ain’t it great. Have you ever wanted to be in a porno video? Now’s your chance.”

“Been there. Done that. Do you think they really are telepathic?”

“Don’t know. That’s what we’re here to find out. But they won’t show their powers. Fucking freaks. So we have to provoke her by torturing him. But first we need some video to convince her daddy that we mean business.”

“Do you really believe in this telepathy crap? Could they harm us?”

“How do I know? But hey, we get to screw this fucking beautiful bitch. That can’t be bad.”

“Are they awake?”

“I think so. Let’s get naked and have some fun with them first. Wayne’s on his way. Let’s get them ready.”

“Shouldn’t we wear masks? What if they recognise us?”

“Nah, the techies have software to pixellate our faces afterwards. Masks are stuffy. And anyway, they’re not going home are they.”

Ayesha struggled to release herself but it was hopeless. The steel cuffs bit into her wrists. She decided to give them what they wanted. Sex was fun, after all, even bondage sex, and she was very, very good at it. She would just be very nice and very submissive and make them so happy that they would let her and Nikos go.

A video camera was started. She was unhooked from the back of the chair, but the handcuffs remained, pinioning her arms behind her back. She was at their mercy. She was pushed into a kneeling position on the floor. Two more men joined the others in the room.

“Way to go Waco,” one of the men said, “that’s the biggest dick I’ve seen for a while. Course, you ain’t seen mine yet. And I’m going first ‘cos I’m your fucking commander.”

“Fuck you Wayne,” the disappointed rapist objected.

Wayne Kraitmann stripped enthusiastically and demonstrated that he was indeed their commander.

One of the naked men stood behind Ayesha, pulled her head up by her hair and undid the gag.

“How you like that Babe,” he said. Ayesha’s first instinct was to cooperate. She smiled sweetly at Kraitman, then opened her mouth to accept a pleasure that she had so often enjoyed with Nikos and their friends. But this dick was being violently forced into her mouth and halfway down her throat and it was throttling her. She began to struggle to breathe. Wayne pulled himself back, allowing her to regain her breath, then began again. Not even Ayesha’s voracious lust could cope with this. It went on and on. The camera was left to run. When Wayne and Waco had finished they squirted themselves onto her face and breasts, drenching her in sticky semen, then the other two took their places and repeated the whole disgusting performance all over again. Eventually the camera was stopped. The spent studs withdrew and a hysterical Yesha was left doubled up on the floor. The lights went out pitching them into total darkness.

“Nikos,” Ayesha wailed, “help me. I tried to give them what they wanted and they hurt me. Help me darling. I can’t see any more. I don’t know what is going to happen.”

Nikos squirmed on the chair but couldn’t move. Ayesha tried to stand up but her legs gave way. She slumped to her knees then inched her way through the darkness until she came up against Nikos. She rested her face against his knees and kissed them. Nikos desperately wanted to hold her. To stroke and cuddle her. To take away her pain. But he was paralysed by the restraining chair and by the drugs which seemed to have addled his telepathic powers. He could do nothing. Even just connecting with Ayesha sapped most of his energy.

"Why?" Ayesha struggled to think at him, her own mind fuddled by the anaesthetic, "why? What have we ever done to them. Why are they doing this to us?"

Nikos didn't know. Whatever they had been sedated with had suppressed their telepathic powers to the point at which they could barely communicate with each other, let alone call for help. All of his love enveloped Ayesha, curled round her and caressed her mind, trying to heal her wounds.

"Try to be brave. I know it hurts like this. But they're not doing anything to us that we haven't done to each other."

"But we do it with love, not with pain. They hate us. Why do they hate us? How can sex be so horrid. I've always loved it. This is horrid! Horrid! Horrid! Nikos. Why? What have we done?"

"They hate us because we're not like them. We're rich and rare. They want something from Drew. And they want something from us. They're not going to kill us. Not yet. Help me. I'm trying to get to Lucy, but I don't seem to have any strength. And she doesn't seem to be listening. Lucy. Lucy. Why is she never there when we need her. Imogen. Imogen, where are you Imogen. Wake up Imogen, you lazy slut."

But Imogen was in the deepest sleep and her mind was closed to their hopelessly attenuated powers. The ordeal continued, unabated by pity or mercy.

Nikos had no idea what time it was, or whether it was day or night. Their lives were enclosed within this windowless little room where monsters preyed on Ayesha's beautiful body and tortured it until she was demented with pain and fear. In the timeless agony that followed she was subjected to every conceivable form of sexual humiliation short of actual penetration. That, apparently, was being saved until the last. But these men were getting desperate to screw her and could not resist their lust for much longer. And Nikos became more and more frantic until the creatures injected him with more sedative which left him hanging limply in his chair, aware of what was being done to his wife, but unable to respond to her or to hear her screaming mind. Ayesha was on her own. The tracker phone was not tracking. Lucy was still not listening and Imogen was sleeping through a nightmare in which her brother and his wife were being horribly tortured and she could do nothing because she could not wake herself up.

Lucy continued not to listen. John Pendle's initial encounter with sex was fumblingly sudden and he came embarrassingly quickly, but not before she had experienced the same out of body sensation with him that her mother had just felt with Mike Throckmorton. Except that,

unlike Throckmorton, he did not travel into the past and his latent psychic energy was painfully weak. By the following morning he was responding to Lucy with the wanton lasciviousness that was the joy and the curse of their unique species. He learned very quickly and he was willing to try everything. They had been going at it almost non stop since eight o'clock the previous night and in between Lucy had tried to explain to him as much as she knew of her family's strange psychic powers. But whilst Pendle could acknowledge the actualities of psychic sex because it exploded through him every time he entered Lucy, he found it very hard to explain. He had, in any case, become so intoxicated with the spellbinding potentials of that luscious body that his rational mind had gone completely offline. Now Lucy was kneeling astride him and looking down at her new lover writhing towards the last instant of ecstasy, then bursting into her with such explosive force that Lucy shrieked with joy before collapsing on top of him.

The panting Pendle lay on his back and looked up at Lucy, still straddled over him, pinioning his retreating penis with her vaginal muscles. She was indescribably beautiful. That long wavy shiny blonde hair cascading over her face, the small firm upturned breasts, the slender waist, the endless legs. She brushed her hair along his chest and kissed him, enveloping him in a golden halo.

"Do you really love me Lucy?" he asked.

She reached for the box of tissues which she had taken from the dressing table, remembering James Sinclair's description of what Sophie and Marcus had done, lifted herself off John's dick and delicately mopped up the remains.

The lights came on again. The four naked men came back into the room. They all looked the same. Strong, slim, athletic, sharp, like PT instructors or gymnasts. Ayesha was stretched out on her front, her hands stills cuffed behind back, her face resting against Nikos's feet. They dragged her away from him and restarted the video camera.

"Ready for more Babe?" big dick Wayne laughed, "this it. Time for the big one. Oh fuck, she's pissed herself. I'm not fucking her like that. Get the hose."

He gestured to his companions, one of whom unrolled the fire hose from the wall and sluiced Ayesha with a jet of icy water. She screamed. Big dick pulled her upright by her hair then pushed her forward onto her knees with her face pressed to the wet floor, and prepared to enter her from behind.

"Now, babe. Doggy doggy. Try this for size."

Kraitman knelt down behind Ayesha, grabbed her hips and slammed

into her. Ayesha screamed. Kraitman grunted in surprise and pulled out.

"Fuck," he muttered, looking quizzically at his dick, "that fucking hurt. She got something in there. Fuck."

He kicked Ayesha onto her back and stuck his fingers into her.

"Jesus," he yelled, "what you fucking got up there?"

Ayesha screamed and screamed until he took his fingers out. He stood up and kicked her again. She subsided into hysterical sobs.

"You're getting it babe. Cunt or ass. One way or the other," he hissed, "hold her down. Let's find out what this is."

"Love you?" Lucy said, "of course I love you. We wouldn't be doing this if I didn't love you. I fell in love with you at that conference in Pasadena, remember? When I was first introduced to you and shook your hand. I knew then, but you're like James Sinclair, your psychic powers are concealed. Hard to read. Now I know for sure. Sex is the key, for us. Why do you think I came to Keele? It was for you. It just took me a long time to make a move because I wasn't sure about how you would react to me. I didn't want to hurt you. I don't share your religious faith, but I respect it." She hesitated and looked down at him, "what do you feel, when we make love? What's it like? For you."

"It's wonderful. It's as though our souls are united as well as our bodies. It's as though our minds are one. And...at that moment, that moment when everything stops, we stand at the edge of the universe. We are the universe, just for an instant. But I still don't understand. What does it mean?"

Lucy rolled off John and lay down beside him, her face on his chest.

"I don't know. We have these powers. But we don't know where they come from. We have to work it out for ourselves, since my parents won't tell me. And you and I are uniquely qualified to work it out because it has something to do with Dark Energy. If you had made love to almost any other woman you would just have had an orgasm. On your own. And she might have had her orgasm, on her own. When we make love our orgasms are shared. You felt what I felt. I felt what you felt. We became one soul, one flesh." Lucy paused and kissed him.

Ayesha was now on her back, her legs pulled apart and held up in the air by two of the thugs. Kraitman again stuck his fingers up her vagina and poked around. It had the opposite effect. The phone Ayesha had concealed retreated further into her vagina. It might have been funny, in some Danish porno burlesque, but for Ayesha it was extremely painful, and it was about to get even more painful. The thick fingers prodded and poked with increasingly violent frustration. She started to

scream again. Nikos tried to get the gag out of his mouth and kicked out at the man standing in front of him. He turned round and hit Nikos with such force that he lost consciousness. When he came round his legs had been pulled back and his ankles shackled behind the chair, forcing his thighs apart and bending his torso away from the chair into a taut bow of pain. Ayesha was face down on the floor being buggered with such with bestial violence that she was howling like a banshee. She let out one final shriek and passed out. The camera recorded it all. And in the instant before she lost consciousness Ayesha's mind made contact with Lucy.

Lucy sat bolt upright.

"My God," she whispered, "Yesha, what's happening. Yesha?"

But Yesha's mind had already closed. Lucy reached out for Nikos and saw everything that Nikos could see. Her mind recoiled in horror.

"Lucy, Lucy. We've been kidnapped. They're torturing Yesha. I love you Lucy, please help. Please."

"What's the matter?" said Pendle, sensing the change in Lucy. Lucy had gone taut, her body tensed up with shock, her golden brown face white with terror.

"Something terrible is happening. My half brother and his wife have been kidnapped. They're being tortured. I have to go to my family. You must come with me. Something terrible is happening. We have to go. I have to contact my mother. I'm so sorry. We have to go."

Lucy jumped off the bed and scrabbled in her bag for the phone which she had deliberately left in her room at Keele so that Drew's watchers would not know where she was. She reached out for her mother who was in a helicopter heading North. Lucy knew where she was going. *"I'm coming,"* Lucy thought at her mother. Caroline's telepathy was not strong enough to respond at any distance but she felt Lucy's thought and sighed with relief. Lucy, at least, was safe.

"How do you know this," Pendle asked.

"Because I do. I can hear their thoughts. I can hear thoughts, anyone's thoughts if I want to. And I can broadcast my thoughts. But mostly I try to block it out. Especially Nikos because he's such a pest. But now, now they're in mortal danger. Somebody wants to kill them."

Pendle sat up beside her and hugged her tight. Lucy started to cry.

"I don't understand," he said gently, "I'll try to understand, but it is hard for me. It goes against all my beliefs."

"There's so much I need to tell you. And it will be so difficult. We are not like other people and it's so hard to understand. I need you with me. Please come with me."

"Of course I'll come with you," he whispered, gently stroking that fine golden hair, "I could never not be with you."

"Better leave her, till the medic get here. He can get this thing out of her. Give her another shot. Give them both a shot."

After the injection the men left the room, but this time the lights stayed on. Ayesha remained doubled up on the floor, hands still cuffed behind her back, blood trickling between her legs. Nikos, only half conscious, tried to reach out to her mind, but his powers were still paralysed by the drugs and Ayesha's mind was hysterical with silent grief. Eventually the panic subsided and coherent thoughts began to take form.

"I won't be able to have children. No children. You know how important it is that we have children. We are the only two who have equal powers. It hurts. It hurts. Nikos, it hurts. Why hasn't Daddy come? Why? Why? Nikos. I'm frightened. I'm going to die."

"No darling, no. It will be alright. Sophie will fix it. You'll be alright. I love you. Daddy will come, but the phone needs to be switched on. Can you get it out?"

"No. He's pushed it right inside. It hurts. It hurt so much. Why have we lost our powers? I can't stop the pain. I can't move the phone. I can't move it with my body or with my mind. I've tried. My mind isn't working. I have no strength. Give your mind. Give me your strength."

Nikos felt her pain course through him like a butcher's knife twisting in his own exposed groin. But his psychic strength had gone. He had no energy left to give.

"The drugs," he struggled to transmit his thoughts, *"they've done something to us. We've lost our powers. Is this what it's like to be human? To have no power over our bodies? To have no power over things? I can't even take away the pain."*

"The handcuffs" Ayesha sobbed silently, *"we can't do anything. Even if I could just squeeze it out. I can't....Nikos. I love you. I love you. Nikos. I'm bleeding. Nikos. Help me."*

But Nikos was in pain himself, his stretched and vulnerable body racked back over the chair. There was nothing he could. Despair engulfed him.

The door opened. Three jump suits and a doctor carrying a medical bag came into the room. The doctor bent over Ayesha and looked with extreme alarm at the trickle of blood between her thighs.

"Get her back onto the chair," he said. Ayesha was hoisted onto the chair and held back with her legs splayed out so that she could be subjected to a crude gynaecological examination.

"You've done some damage here," the doctor said, "you're supposed to keep them fit. No violence. And what the hell are you doing to him?" He gestured at Nikos's contorted body, "he's in pain. For Christ's sake."

"We didn't mean to hurt her," Wayne Kraitmann blustered, "it's her fault for sticking something up her scratch."

"What?" the doctor replied incredulously, "what do you mean?"

"She's got something up her scratch. Something. I dunno. Get it out."

The doctor took some forceps from his bag and delicately inserted them into Ayesha. Ayesha gasped, but did nothing, just looked at him supinely. Eventually the phone appeared, slimy and flecked with blood. The doctor wiped it with a paper tissue and flipped it open. He shrugged.

"You're in luck," he said, handing the phone to Kraitman, "it's switched off. Don't..."

Kraitman ignored him and switched the phone on. The doctor shook his head in despair. On the other side of the world a Trikos computer recognised a number registered to the Hanover Terrace house and triangulated on its current cell location. Seconds later the coordinates were flashed to Drew Quatermain. The tracker had failed but the fall back had worked long enough to tell him what he need to know. His helicopter was already airborne and heading for Shropshire.

"You've had a message," Kraitman smirked before dropping the phone on the floor and stamping on it. "Too bad you'll never know who it was from. Rich witch."

"What happens now?" the Second Suit asked.

"Well, no more of this," said the doctor who produced a speculum and continued his internal examination of Ayesha, "you've bruised her ovaries and torn her rectum. She'll recover. Given time. But you weren't supposed to do this. This was supposed to be a controlled experiment. You were supposed to wait for me. And had it occurred to you morons that this phone might have a tracking device in it and you've just activated it?"

"Fuck that. If it was tracker she would have switched it on. She's just a stupid rich bitch. Our orders were to make some Gonzo videos of her being fucked. To use for leverage. That's all."

"Whose stupid idea was that? You were supposed to wait for me. Now she's damaged goods. Now she's going to need time to recover before we can run the telekinesis tests."

"Well, that's academic. We're not going to give her back, are we. Or him. So recovery need not be factored in. Anyway, we've seen the files. We know what to do. You're just here to keep them alive 'til we've got what we want out of them."

"That's right. My business is to save lives not to take them. These two are laboratory specimens. They're no use to us dead." The doctor paused, and looked into Yesha's face. Even in extreme distress she was unbelievably beautiful. He wondered how he would feel if this was his own daughter. "I'll have to report this to the Colonel," he shook his head and scowled at the licensed thug, "you shouldn't be treating them like this. And get him out of that stress position. You're breaking his back!"

"I don't think so," said Wayne, producing a pistol, "I've got news for you. We don't work for the Colonel and I don't think you're going to report anything to anyone."

Ayesha let out another piercing scream as the doctor's brains blew out of the back his head, spraying her with blood and brain tissue.

"And you fucking shut up, you stupid fucking bitch."

Ayesha was slapped in the face and subsided into whimpering sobs. The hose was deployed again. Ice cold water cascaded over her, sluicing the doctor's brains down the floor drain holes.

"What now?" the second Jump Suit looked questioningly at Wayne.

"Clamp her to the chair. Give them both some more roofie. Put them out for three hours. It's after nine. We've been at it all night. Time for some steak and some shuteye. After lunch we'll try the drugs and apply pressure. Lange want results. Let's get this wanker's notes and see what he was going to do. Make her secure. Just in case."

The clamps on the front legs of the chair snapped round Ayesha's ankles. The handcuffs were again hooked over the back of the chair. The needles went into their arms. Then the doors closed, leaving Ayesha and Nikos alone with the dead doctor and sliding into semi consciousness.

"They're going to kill us, aren't they," Ayesha sobbed as the light went out in her mind.

Nikos, gagged, tried to reach out with his mind but the rohypnol was already inhibiting his telepathy so contact was difficult and the pain in his arched back and spatchcocked thighs was becoming unbearable no matter how hard he tried to suppress it.

"It looks like it. Oh, darling Yesha I love you so much. Lucy help us. Lucy, please. Lucy. Imogen. Wake up. Imogen Wake up. Please one of you, help us. Why is no one listening? Oh no! Not again! I can't....."

Then the darkness of the drug overwhelmed them,

"If you have these powers," Pendle asked as he sat beside Lucy in the shabby Honda, "who don't you use them?"

"Because the powers that we have are the powers that witches and

wizards have ancestrally had. Humans hate them. And if we reveal anything to them they will hunt us down and kill us. As they did in the past. So we don't use them. It's too dangerous."

"This is a more tolerant age, surely."

"It's true that this is an age that tolerates the supernatural but only by not believing in it. Except maybe spiritual healers and psychics who are tolerated, sort of. And that protects us because people would not believe that we could do such things. But if we were to use our powers we would draw attention to ourselves. Scientists would be curious. You're already curious, aren't you. That's what learning is all about, curiosity. But if they find out the truth and it becomes public knowledge, then the men of God will come after us with sharpened sticks and silver bullets."

Pendle shook his head. In his mind the powers he had discovered within himself were a gift of God, and as a gift of God they should be revered.

"It isn't like that," said Lucy, reading his mind, "even if it was just telepathy we would always be a risk to normal humans. But we have far more than telepathy. It certainly includes telekinesis and psychic healing. I've always tried to deny it. But our parents can move things around by thought alone. And so can we. When we were children we could do amazing things. Only, now we seem to have forgotten how to do most of it. We don't know what we are capable of, but I do know that we are an evolutionary step forward. A superior species. And for that reason alone humans would have to kill us. They've done it before. Many times. Oh, for God's sake!" The Honda slowed down to a crawl for what seemed like hours and hours of motorway roadworks.

"Okay. Give her the junk. It's coming up to noon. We can't wait any more. We're going to get a reaction out of her if it kills us." Jump Suit Two grabbed Ayesha's left arm and pushed the needle into it. "There you go Babe. Sweet dreams."

Ayesha's mouth lolled open. She felt the first shock of the heroine circulating in her bloodstream and entering her brain. Then it dissipated into mere lethargy. She was immune to narcotics. Her father had seen to that. Her father had spent millions of dollars to make the world immune to narcotics in order to protect psychics from inadvertently revealing themselves. But the effect of all hypnotic drugs on immunised psychics was simply to suppress their psychic abilities, leaving them as defenceless as normals. Drew Quatermain had made a catastrophic mistake.

They left Nikos and Ayesha for nearly an hour in the expectation that

the drug would take effect. Then, when it was obvious that Ayesha was not going to do anything, one of the men stuffed a small rubber ball into Nikos's mouth and replaced the fabric gag. Wayne Kraitmann went to the workbench and picked up the gas blowlamp. She watched in horror as he ignited the flame.

"We're going to fry his nuts Babe, real slow. Better do something if you ever want to fuck him again."

He leaned down in front of Nikos and flicked the blowlamp over his crotch, singeing his pubic hair. At the same time another man stood behind Nikos and slowly twisted a rope round his neck. Nikos tried to scream but the gag prevented him. His mental screams surged into Ayesha. She began to howl, piercing feral hysterical screams which so enraged her tormentors that she too had a rag stuffed into her mouth to gag her. Her mind exploded in a supernova of impotent flaming rage. But all of her powers were neutralised. Nothing happened. Nikos was unconscious. His eyes glazed over. His head slumped forward. She stared unbelieving at the burning flesh between Nikos's legs. They backed off, removing the flame and relaxing the rope.

"Look at him you bitch. Look at his dick. He ain't never going to fuck again. Do something. Show us what you've got. It's his eyes next. Then we'll saw his feet off. Real slow."

"Jesus Christ," Lucy screamed, "Nikos!!! Nikos!!! They're killing him." She slammed on the brakes and swerved the car off the road onto the hard shoulder where it screeched to a halt.

"John, John, hold my hand, quickly, hold my hand. I need all your strength."

Pendle, shocked, head over heels in love, and unable to resist, gave his soul to a witch. Lucy's face went white. Her teeth clenched. A voice echoed in her memory. Remember. *Use my gift to you, but only when you have to. You will need it for the storm which is coming.* She remembered. Pendle's mind fused into hers. Energy flowed from him and through Lucy and Nikos into Ayesha. But it was not enough. John's powers were weak, hardly perceptible. Then he felt something else surged through Lucy's consciousness and through her into him. Something unstoppable and unbelievably potent whose irresistible wake sucked all the energy out of him.

"Legion," John gasped, "my name is Legion."

The man with the rope screamed with the pain, clutched his head and collapsed on the floor with his cameraman colleague. The others, gathered to watch Ayesha unleash the paranormal powers that they did

not believe in, collapsed in the same instant, their brains suddenly vacant. The blowlamp fell from lifeless hands, rolled across the floor, came to rest against the body of the dead doctor and set fire to his jacket and the plastic flooring on which he was lying.

“What have we done Lucy?” Pendle’s voice was shrill with panic, “what have we done?”

Lucy was alternately shrieking Nikos’ name and sobbing hysterically, hammering at the steering wheel with her fist and then clutching at him with desperate fingers.

“We’ve killed four people,” she sobbed, “four living creatures. We’ve killed them. And I don’t know how we did it.”

“Lucy, Lucy, it cannot be. You cannot kill people by thinking at them.”

“Oh yes you can. Believe me. And I made you help me. I couldn’t have done it without you. We are both guilty. It’s against everything we believe. And everything you believe. We cannot kill. I should be dead. Oh my God, it’s burning. They have to get out of there.”

“*Use your power Lucy,*” an unfamiliar voice whispered in her head, “*use it now.*”

Lucy hammered her little fists against the steering wheel, “I can’t see them,” she screamed, as though she was talking to someone else, “I don’t know where they are. How can I save them if I can’t see them.” She fell silent for an instant, as though listening to a secret inner voice. Then she vanished. Her empty clothes collapsed into a heap on the car seat. Seconds later she was back, still screaming.

“What happened?” Pendle shouted.

“I don’t know,” Lucy was almost hysterical, “I don’t know.” John Pendle raised his hand to slap her face but, in the instant before his hand struck, Lucy came back. Her face straightened, her eyes focussed. “Where are my clothes?” she whimpered then slumped forward against the steering wheel. John Pendle looked around anxiously, wondering how he would explain a naked woman driver to a passing traffic policeman. Eventually Lucy flickered back into life.

“It’s alright,” she sighed, eventually “it’s alright. I’m okay. Don’t worry. What’s happened to my clothes?”

“You’re sitting on them,” John replied incredulously, “what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Lucy gasped in an exasperated voice, “I don’t bloody well know.” She pulled her clothes from under her bottom, fumbled her way back into her knickers and skirt and pulled the loose blouse over her head.

John put his arms round and held her as tightly as her could in the confined space of the car. In his mind he returned to the shock that had pierced him as something inexplicable had drained out of him and into Lucy. He remembered his bible and the words of Christ. "*Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is gone out of me. ...*" It could not be. It could not possibly be. Lucy continued to sob, great shuddering sobs which racked his soul. His mind reached out to her and to his astonishment he found himself inside her head, feeling what she felt, experiencing what she experienced, remembering what she remembered, seeing what she had seen through the eyes of Nikos. And then miraculously seeing it through Lucy's own eyes. Lucy had been there.

"Oh my God," he whispered, "what have you done? What have we done? Oh dear Lord, forgive me. Oh, Lucy, what happened? How did you do that? Where did you go?"

"Take me home," Lucy whimpered, "home. Croxton Hall, it's near Stokesley, in North Yorkshire. Drive. Take us there. Please." She collapsed forward against the steering wheel. John shook her but she did not stir. For a moment he thought that she was dead. He got out of the car and came round to the driver's side and lifted Lucy out. She was so light, lighter than light itself. In his arms she seemed as small and delicate as a child. He put her on the back seat and strapped her in. Then he took the driver's seat and found an AA road atlas in the door pocket. Croxton Hall was near the village of Croxton-in-Cleveland, just off the A172, south of Stokesley. It would not be difficult to find.

Wayne Kraitmann came round to find the room full of acrid smoke from the burning plastic floor. He tried to stand up, but just as he reached his feet a blast of white lightning hurled him back against the wall. Stun grenade, he thought. In the blink of an eye he saw a golden angel with wings of ice blue fire, holding the hands of the burning boy and the hysterical girl. Then they vanished. He looked in disbelief at the empty torture chairs and the flames licking round them. His three associates were also coming round, trying to lever themselves up on their elbows, choking in the asphyxiating acrid smoke. He collapsed forward on his face and the lights went out.

CHAPTER 10

On the mantelpiece above the Adam fireplace in the elegant drawing room of Croxton Hall an ancient clock counted out the hours of noon. Its chime was ponderous and leisurely, as though it knew that time was merely an illusion measured out for the benefit of humans, but irrelevant to Gods. Mike Throckmorton took stock of his situation. They had left London in the helicopter around eight thirty in the morning and arrived at Croxton just over two hours later. He had already met Marcus Scott, who looked not at all like his son, and Sophie Devenish, who was more beautiful in the flesh than his photographs could even hint at, and her daughter Imogen who was as indistinguishable from her mother as Lucy was from Caroline. Her hair, like her mother's, was long, dark auburn brown, falling to her shoulders in natural loose tasselled curls. Unlike the fearsome Caroline, Sophie was soft and gentle and tearfully distraught at the kidnapping of her son and his wife. Marcus stood with his arm round her and consoled her and the love which flowed between them resonated in Mike's newly sensitised consciousness. He began to understand what Caroline had been talking about. The love that these people held for each other was manifest, almost tangible and it was a collective love, unconditional and absolute, unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was true. By their standards he was without love.

There was no sign of Drew Quatermain but Mike was introduced to a small elfin woman with shining black bobbed hair who he recognised as Andrea Hanson, but was simply called Puck, as though that was enough. Also present was the novelist James Sinclair and his wife Hilary. Sinclair was interesting and, like the others, had carried his age without blemishes, as did his wife. Maybe, Mike thought, it was all down to Yorkshire water. But, whereas the females in the Scott Hannay Devenish family shared the same general facial shape, irrespective of their hair colouring, James Sinclair had a more tweedy ascetic look, vaguely Roman and patrician, and he was discernibly older than the others, though not by much. In truth none of them looked older than their mid thirties, and young mid thirties at that.

Sinclair's wife Hilary was different. Not as slender as the others. She had a splendid curvy figure, big tits, and a determined English Rose face surmounted by a disorderly mane of tawny blonde hair. Mike thought of Kate Winslett. She was outstanding. A proper woman, and she had amazingly sexy eyes which he knew instantly were for her husband only. He would be wasting his time there. And also with Sophie. But Imogen was something else. Imogen was sex incarnate and the moment that she

shook his hand he knew that she was full of psychic lust and would give him anything that he wanted before he even asked. He also knew that she was passionately in love with someone else, and that someone else was her absent half sister Lucy.

Mike rather liked Sinclair, not least because his firm handshake did not transmit a psychic shock nor did his mind intrude into Mike's increasingly guarded consciousness. Hilary, however, was as fey as the others, though the consciousness that momentarily clicked with him was different, and more familiar, as though she and Mike shared some common wavelength.

All of them were edgy and anxious and seemed to be waiting for instructions from somewhere else, as if they were not able to take control of the situation for themselves. The mysterious and absent Drew Quatermain, Mike assumed. No one spoke to him at any length or asked him who he was or why he was there. They just sat quietly in the drawing room. Nothing much was said, but Mike had the uneasy sensation that unspoken messages were flowing between them, about him, perhaps, but mostly about the absent children. They weren't children of course. Nikos and Ayesha were in their late twenties, as were the other young ones, though he suspected that Amethyst was much younger, eighteen or nineteen maybe. He wondered what her place was in this curious community. He watched the subtle changes in body language and the minute shifts of expression which flitted across their faces as though prompted by ghosts. At one point Mike had the distinct impression that someone else had entered the room. But there were only the nine bodies sitting tensely in the three large Chesterfield sofas arranged in front of the elegant Adam fireplace.

After a while Hilary and Amethyst left them and came back a little later with mugs of tea and sandwiches which were consumed in silence. James Sinclair looked up as the clock chimed once.

Imogen, who had been sitting quietly beside Amethyst on one of the sofas on either side of the great fireplace, went white with shock, dropped her tea cup, pressed her hands against her temples and began scream. The others turned and looked at her, their faces sculpted into expressions of total horror. Mike watched, detached and fascinated. For an instant the room was frozen. Then they all fell onto their knees, formed a circle and held each other's hands. Mike moved to join them, but the circle refused to open for him. Whatever was happening he was being shut out. Imogen continued to sob. Mike stared at them in wonder. Even in extreme grief they were unbelievably beautiful. He ached to be part of this magical circle but he could not read their minds which were resolutely blocked to him. They were concentrating on something else.

Something intangible and ethereal. Tears were trickling from Hilary Sinclair's closed eyes. He realised that he had seen this before but the memory of it evaded him.

"We have to do something," Sophie said tearfully, "they're going to kill him. Lucy can't cope on her own. We can't wait for Drew."

Caroline stood up and looked round the room. It was very clear that in the absence of Drew Quatermain she was their natural leader and she was about to take control. Her eyes fell on Mike, and then back to Sophie. Mike sensed that an unheard conversation was taking place between them but he did not yet have their ability to eavesdrop on other minds. Sophie was shaking her head and sobbing.

"There are nine of us," said Caroline, reverting to decisive speech, "we can do it. We have to do it. Lucy knows what to do. But she doesn't have the power. The man she is with is like James. The universe speaks to him, but he doesn't consciously hear it. He has no significant psychic energy of his own. We need him." She looked at Mike.

"I'm not going to kill anyone," said Hilary, "you know what I think about this."

"Nor me," said Puck, "and it's over thirty years since we last did this. We know that James doesn't have much power. And what about her?" She gestured at the silent and visibly alarmed Amethyst.

"You don't have to kill anyone," Caroline replied through gritted teeth, "he has the power and the will but not the knowledge. Lucy has the knowledge. The power has to come from him, and from Marcus. And Amethyst is one of us. Look into her mind and show her what has to be done. She's as strong as we were at her age. Stronger." She paused, then looked directly at Hilary. For an instant Hilary looked through the panic stricken eyes of Ayesha. Nikos was being burned alive and Ayesha was silently screaming with their shared pain and fear.

"Alright," Hilary agreed, ashen faced, "but only with James."

"There's no one else. I'll take Mike. Sophie and Marcus. You and James. Hurry. There isn't much time."

"No," Sophie sobbed, "we don't know him. We don't know what he can do. He's not like us."

"He's enough like us to do what is necessary. He wants to do it."

"Wait a minute lady," Mike exclaimed, aware that something was being planned for him without his consent, "what do I want to do?"

"You are a killer. You want to kill," Caroline snapped, "you want to kill. We cannot kill. We need you to kill for us."

Mike shook his head, "Who am I supposed to kill?"

"You don't need to know," Caroline's voice was brittle, "don't argue Mike. There isn't time. If you don't help us our children are going to

die.”

Imogen started to scream again then clutched at her throat as though choking.

“What’s in it for me?” Mike asked.

“The best shag you will ever have in your entire life,” Caroline’s voice was loaded with importunate contempt. She was pleading with the Devil.

“Not enough, Lady” Mike replied, “I want answers. And I want to meet Drew Quatermain.”

Caroline nodded. “Ah,” she said, “you are true to your mission. Well, there are no answers, only theories. But you will certainly meet Drew. I can guarantee that.”

“Okay,” Mike replied, “what do I do?”

“Take your clothes off and join this circle.”

Mike’s life was ruled by two categorical imperatives. One was to fulfil his mission. The other was to shag as many women as possible in as many ways as possible. If his mission involved the best shag of his life he was not going to refuse. He took off his clothes and joined the already naked circle. What was happening was familiar. Adrian Graves had described this. Hieros Gamos. The Great Rite. The Square of Three. Some arcane sexual ritual. It was more than familiar. He had seen this before. Only this time he was not going to be a mere observer.

Caroline knelt in front of him then straddled him until she was poised above his ever ready dick. Behind her he could see Sophie Devenish lowering herself onto Marcus, and Hilary Sinclair doing the same thing with her husband, who looked surprised and nonplussed. The others, Puck and Imogen and Amethyst filled the gaps between the kneeling bodies to complete the circle. For the second time in less than twenty four hours he felt himself slipping into Caroline. Not just the familiar sensual slithering bliss of spearing himself into the softest parts of a willing woman but that extraordinary psychic shock as though the insertion of his key into her waiting lock completed an ethereal circuit which connected both of them to infinity.

“Do nothing,” said Caroline, “leave it all to me. It is crucial that we all come at the same time. You understand. If you try to rush it I will control you. Just...hold out your hands and take the hands of Amethyst and Imogen.”

Mike obeyed. As the hands met around the circle he felt another surge of energy and for instant he thought that their consciousness had merged. All of the nine minds in the circle became one mind. Then it was gone. Caroline leaned backwards until her head rested on the floor in the centre of the circle next to Sophie and Hilary. She flicked out her

long blonde hair at the last minute so that it mingled with the shining hair of the other two. They were unbelievably beautiful. The women stretched out their hands and grasped each other by the wrists. Another shock coursed through Mike Throckmorton. He could feel what they felt. See what they saw. The spokes in this sexual cartwheel united into one seamless flesh, one unified soul. He was inside Caroline's mind, feeling himself in her as she felt him, and at the same time he was sharing Sophie's body, and her soul and her sublime love for all of them and for all living things. And Hilary. Hilary was different. Hilary was like him. Cruder. More violent. Hilary could kill, but wouldn't. Caroline was already manipulating him with her vaginal muscles and with such subtlety that he was already on the point of climax. He felt her irresistible mind holding him back. Then the other two men reached the same point. All six of them climaxed simultaneously releasing one blinding orgasm which surged through their outstretched hands and was amplified by the unleashed lust of the other women in the circle. It was as though he was screwing all six of them simultaneously and sharing as well the parallel orgasms of the other two men. The sensation was extraordinary. Out of this world. Blinding bright and it hurled him back into that endless spiralling elevator shaft, punctuated by the brief flashes of lives glimpsed from a roller coaster hurtling back in time until time itself stopped.

The familiar circle of naked bodies opened up to let him in. Near to the Circle of the Others his own people formed a much larger circle around a great fire whose blazing, sparks flew up to the star studded sky. But it was not the place Mike remembered from his previous orgasmic vision. The night air was hot and humid. Behind him was the dull roar of breaking surf. In front of him he could just make out the massive moonlit sides of a deep and densely wooded valley. The two Circles were on the edge of a broad beach, between the sea and the forest. The ice must have returned to engulf their temperate Northern home. They gone South to escape it, into the lands of men. But where they were Mike had no idea.

He turned back to the gap in the Circle through which a naked girl was leading an animal, a creature like an antelope or a kudu, with two long curved horns so close together that at first sight they seemed like one. A creature that no longer existed. He knelt reverentially in front of the slim golden bronze girl who held the head of the animal and whispered in its long ears. She was the one who prepared the animal for death. But he was the one who would take its life. That was their special gift. His daughter and grand daughters looked like her. They

shared her long dark hair and calm gentle face. But she was pure. His daughters and granddaughters would always carry inside them the mark of their real origins. They were not pure. She stroked its long snout. The animal began to kneel in front of him. He knew what would happen. They had done this many times before. It was what held them together. The ritual gift of food. The taking of life to give life. She placed her forehead against the forehead of the doomed animal and spoke to its mind, reminding it of its long and happy life and thanking it for relinquishing that life to her without fear. She felt the mind of the animal begin to sleep, and, as it slipped away into the darkness, she took his lethal energy and focussed it into the animal's sleeping consciousness, shutting off its brain and slowing down its heart until it was on the verge of death. The animal fell forward on its knees and the creature that was Mike cut its throat with a razor sharp flint. The animal died without fear or pain. Its soul soared upwards to the Great Spirit, mingling its golden shards with the sparks flying upwards from the fire on which its mortal remains would soon be roasted.

He looked up at the girl. She was crying silent tears for a lost life. Then, after the coming feast, she would come to him and give herself to him. That would be his reward for taking a life, the chance to create a life. And perhaps she would bear his child. The Others had so few children. Fewer and fewer over the centuries. Perhaps.

He turned his great slow head to his waiting tribe and beckoned to them to come into the circle and prepare the animal, deftly stripping it of its hide and entrails and quartering it so that it could be roasted. The Neanderthals in the second circle, held hands and shared their grief for the death of the beast and their joy in the knowledge that it had given itself to them willingly and would now join its ancestors in the heart of the Great Spirit, where they themselves would one day be reunited with their ancestors and with all living things. And they would be helped into death without pain by these lordly golden creatures who did not die but came to them in their last moments to lead them back into infinity.

His slow mind detected a change. A combination of intuition and animal perception of an approaching danger. The Others had felt it too. The females turned their heads and looked towards the dark edge of the surrounding forest. The males stood up. A group of tall figures were advancing on the two Circles. Many of them. Many, many of them. Tall, and bearded. Dressed in furs and armed with sharpened sticks and spears with flint tips. The creatures from the land of the unbearable sun. The creatures who would inherit the earth. They had met them before, deep in the forest, and it had always ended in death. He gripped his flint knife and waited for the Others to act. Three males and three females

walked forward towards the humans. The males extending their hands in gestures of friendship, the females offered their bodies for love. Nothing happened. He felt the consciousness of the leading male go out to greet the mind of the human. The human felt the alien invasion in his head and reacted first with horror and then with rage. His arm came up and launched the spear into the chest of the golden god.

Mike's host felt the internal scream, and for the first time in his own life he sensed the death of one of his earthly gods. The blind red rage which was his feral legacy engulfed him and surged through his tribe. They threw themselves onto the humans, grappling them to the ground and slashing at them with flint knives and crude stone hammers. He was stronger, stockier than they were but there were many of them and they fought tenaciously. It was only a matter of time before they overpowered him. He knew from watching them in the woods that they did not always kill their enemies. They liked to capture them and torture them so that they would die slowly. And the more slowly and painfully the victim died the more energy they took from his death. They stank of sweat and hatred and animal violence. His own visceral hatred overwhelmed him. There was no time to think or to run. This life was all about fight or flight and now there was no alternative but to fight. He grappled another human to the ground and sawed at the throat with the sharpened flint. The creature was screaming with fear. Mike looked into its eyes and saw his own reflection. Blood spurted out of the severed artery. The body underneath him thrashed about, then died. He stood up, triumphant, and looked around for his family. But the battle was far from over, and his own kind were losing. There were too many of the humans. The Others did not fight. The females continued to kneel in their circle. The two remaining males held out their hands in supplication. Then a stone from a slingshot hit him and the world went black.

When he woke up it was almost light. He was hog tied to a tree stump with rope made of twisted withies. There were bodies everywhere. On the beach and face down in the bloody surf. Neanderthals and humans. Many humans. In the distance there were screams from the Neanderthal women who were being raped or butchered depending on how much they looked like the women of the invaders. Those who survived would be taken into slavery. Women were valuable and could be traded. He lifted his shaggy head and looked for the Others, his lordly ones, his living gods, his emissaries of the Great Spirit. The two remaining males were pinned spreadeagled to the ground. Stuffed into their groins were small piles of dry brushwood and kindling. The demonic creatures watched, detached, curious, as the kindling was lit

with a torch brought from the embers of the great fire. Mike's host felt the pain radiating out from his dying gods. No sound. Only their silent screams which blazed into his own psyche with the fires of hell. The demons reacted with anger at the refusal of their victims to yield up their pain for the pleasure of their tormentors. Ropes were looped round their necks and slowly tightened. The demons wielded death with calculated expertise but still the Lordly Ones did not respond. Mike felt their lives flicker out with the embers of their burning genitalia. The humans squatted down and looked at the dead bodies in awe. Prodded them cautiously, until they were certain of their death, then fell upon them with their sharpened flints and tore them into bloody fragments, butchering them like animals and throwing the pieces on the remains of the fire to be cooked and eaten.

Then they turned their attention to the still kneeling women who, to his utter astonishment, willingly gave their divine bodies to these monsters. His mind recoiled in horror. He could feel their pain and disbelief as the great gift they offered was spurned in favour of violent rape. The animal which lurked just behind his sapient mind went berserk with jealousy and rage and disappointment. He howled and screamed and roared in defiance. Shadows fell over him. Three of the humans knelt on the ground in front of him. Their faces were bearded, their bodies naked and engorged with the expectation of rape. One of them had a wooden shaft into which were fitted two rows of sharpened teeth to make what would one day evolve into a sword. It grinned at him and poked him with the proto sword. He scowled back at it from beneath his broad forehead and hissed his hatred at them.

They spoke to him with their strange sounds but he did not understand them. Their minds were closed. He tried to use his limited skill to look into their consciousness but all he found there was jealousy, lust, greed, wild homicidal competitiveness and a dark and devious intelligence. Three more came to join their fellows, dragging with them the golden girl who had helped him to kill the animal. They laughed at him then took it in turns to rape his goddess. They took her on all fours, like animals, like dogs, pulling on the jet black hair to bend back her neck, so that he could see the terror in her face. Without the males of her species she had no power to resist. So she gave herself to them willingly, as though to appease them, but they wanted to hurt her so that when they had finished with her they would leave her defiled body broken, bleeding and whimpering.

Then they turned their attention to the gross creature lashed to the tree stump. Mike knew that his time had come. What was left of his leather loincloth was ripped away. The creature with the toothed sword

forced open Mike's strong thighs and looked in awe at the massive genitalia. He roared with rage and envy and slashed blindly at Mike's legs and arms. Another looped a twisted cord round his thick neck and began to wind it tight with a stick. The pain was unendurable.

"Give me your mind." His dying consciousness was invaded by the urgent mind of the raped female. *"Give me your mind."*

He obeyed, as he had always obeyed the will of the Others. He felt the delicate feminine mind explore his consciousness, soothing his pain and focussing his energy, then, for the first time, and at the moment of his death, the goddess took him into her consciousness. He was embraced by a mind struggling to reconcile its profound love for all living creatures with a necessity which was contrary to its very essence. It could not kill. Could not do harm. But it was going to kill and it would die for it.

"Now, kill them. Kill them all. Give me your power."

His energy surged out of his subconscious and through her into the minds of his enemies. They fell back, screaming and holding their heads in pain. Then their minds burst. He felt the darkness engulf them. The lights going out. They were dead, and they had no souls. They were not children of the light, beloved by the Great Spirit. They had nowhere to go. Only darkness. *All alone in the darkness.* The gentle female mind came back.

"It is time for you to go to your ancestors," the sad presence said, *"give me the last of your strength and I will take you there. Come with me."*

She leaned forward and touched his cheek. Her hands were soft and delicate. She smiled at him reassuringly.

"Time to go. Do not fear the dark. You will come again to the light. Do not fear."

He obeyed the will of the dying goddess. His consciousness faded. He fell once more into the future and woke in the arms of Caroline Hannay who was holding him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. She was crying, great wracked sobs which were only one step away from hysteria. The rest of the circle had collapsed into a pile of heaving tear stricken flesh. Marcus with his arms round Sophie, James Sinclair hugging Hilary and Puck. Amethyst and Imogen unconscious on the floor, clutching each other in blind terror. Mike's rational mind resumed control of itself.

"Did it work?" Mike struggled to get the words out. Caroline released her hold on him and sat back on her haunches. She looked at Sophie who shook her head. This time Mike almost sensed the thoughts which passed between the two distraught women. "They're still alive?" he

asked.

"We don't know," said Caroline, "maybe. We didn't sense their death. But nor can we sense their life. They're not conscious. And neither is Lucy. And neither are they." She looked at Imogen and Amethyst who were coiled round each other like lovers frozen in a Rodin sculpture. "It seems the experience was too much for them. Get dressed Mike. It's over. You will get your answers soon."

Mike found his clothes and put them on. The shock of what had happened began to fade and the actuality of his nightmare eluded him. When the older ones were dressed they tried to wake Amethyst and Imogen who remained resolutely comatose. Eventually Mike followed Marcus who had gently lifted his daughter into his arms. Mike did the same for Amethyst, light as the breath of angels, and together they carried both girls to Imogen's unruly room and laid them side by side in her large bed. They seemed like two beautiful innocent children. Amethyst stirred in her sleep and rolled over against Imogen, laying her face on Imogen's breasts and flopping her arm round Imogen's slim waist. Marcus pulled the duvet over them, then leaned forward and kissed each of them on the forehead.

"Are they going to be okay?" Mike asked.

"I think so," said Marcus sadly, "I think they're just sleeping. They're young. I think it was too much of a shock for them. For all of us. How do you feel?"

Mike shook his head.

"I feel as though I've been kicked in the guts by a buffalo. And I've got one hell of a headache."

"It's always a shock to the system," Marcus replied, "that's why we stopped doing it thirty years ago. Touching the face of the Universe is a risky business. It changes you forever."

"I'll say," Mike grunted, "but I'd like some answers. What in hell actually happened."

"In time," Marcus replied, "talk to Caroline, or James Sinclair. James understands. You know, we've never really told our children what they are. I think it's time we told them. You too. Did you hear that?"

Mike recognised the unmistakable sound of a helicopter landing.

"Drew Quatermain?" he asked.

"Maybe," Marcus replied, "we haven't heard anything from Drew. But he knows what's happening. Caroline sent him the emergency code."

"Persephone?"

"Yes, Persephone. The daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld."

But it was not Drew Quatermain. The woman pilot of the helicopter

was met in the entrance hall by Caroline and Sophie, who took her hands and looked earnestly into her eyes. The others, James and Hilary and Puck stood close behind and watched. Suddenly they all linked hands, forming another circle. Nothing was said. Mike felt once again that uneasy sensation that he had been shut out and bypassed, and this time it was different. This time his mind had reached out to them and they had deliberately blocked him. They had not been surprised that he had suddenly acquired some of their telepathic ability. But they did not trust him and he was not included in this seance.

Sophie started to cry, not howling sobs but gentle hopeless tears. She buried her face in Marcus's neck. He put his arms round her and cuddled her tightly. Then Marcus, Sophie and Amethyst left in the helicopter for an undisclosed destination. The body language of those who stayed behind remained sombre and undemonstrative.

About an hour after the helicopter had left, Lucy's Honda came up the long drive to Croxton Hall. John Pendle banged on the front door and was met by an anxious Caroline whose similarity to her daughter took John's breath away. Together they carried the unconscious Lucy into the Hall and upstairs to the bedroom where her half sister was still sleeping. Caroline undressed her and put her into the bed beside Imogen.

In the drawing room John Pendle was introduced by Mike to James Sinclair and Hilary, and to Puck.

Mike looked at Pendle who was visibly shaken by what he thought had happened.

"More things," Mike said, "in heaven and earth..."

Pendle nodded and sat down in one of the wing chairs by the great windows. He put his head into hands and began to cry.

CHAPTER 11

Mike collapsed onto the big double bed and reflected on what had happened in the last twenty four hours. After Lucy had been brought home and put to bed he had walked round the gardens with James Sinclair who he found much easier to talk to than Caroline. Sinclair, however was very evidently worried and gave very little away so that most of the walk was an appreciation of the Hall itself, as though it was a distraction from the unacceptable truth which hung over all of them. The Hall was certainly worth appreciating. Mike was unfamiliar with the world of the English gentry. Their houses and estates were a mystery to him and made little sense to an egalitarian American for whom the only index of status was naked wealth. Yet even he was aware that old money in America was modest and discrete, just as it was here. The Hall was beautiful. A Georgian Palladian mansion, elegant and restrained, with a classical pillared portico topped with a tympanum and flanked by two symmetrical wings together with an Orangery which had been converted into a large indoor swimming pool.

From the front of the Hall he could look out over a triangle of carefully manicured parkland. To his right was the mile long drive lined with tall chestnut trees interspersed with short conical conifers. On his left was emparked woodland, and directly in front of the Hall was a haha beyond which the open parkland converged on the village and its cricket pitch. Unlike many Georgian derived country houses, this one had its ground floor entrance under the portico, rather than via the more usual curved staircases leading to a grand first floor entrance. This made the hall more welcoming and less daunting to enter and betrayed the ancestral character of its owners; quiet, modest and unassuming quality.

Inside the double front door was a large entrance hall tiled with black and white marble and partially divided by a grand staircase leading to the first floor drawing room, the study library and the various apartments. It was, James Sinclair explained, a rather luxurious commune which was mostly left in the hands of James and Hilary, since Marcus and Sophie spent much of their time in Greece, which Sophie claimed to be her spiritual home. Caroline and the various children flitted between Croxton, the Hanover Terrace house, Keele and properties in Greece and America. James was not going to be drawn on Drew Quatermain, though he did admit that Quatermain came to Croxton from time to time with his wife Sonja, and that he was strongly opposed to Nikos and Ayesha living with minimal security in London. To offset the risks all of the children were supposed to carry cell-phones which

incorporated a GPS chip which allowed them to be tracked at all times, whether the phone was on or off. Lucy, however, was notorious for deliberately losing or destroying her phones and when Drew had suggested an alternative which entailed implanting a tracking device under her skin Lucy had gone so ballistic that Drew had backed off and threatened to abandon her to fate. And that was as far as James went.

Mike asked him about the book, *Scholars and Gentlemen*, but got no further than he had with Adrian Graves and Clair Grey at Teleos Books. James knew that Mike had seen Adrian Graves and that Adrian had known from the beginning who Mike was and what he was up to. Everything that had happened at Malibu had been passed on to Marcus and Caroline and from them to Drew Quatermain. Once again Mike felt deceived and humiliated. They had seen him coming and were already prepared for him. His capabilities as an undercover agent had been woefully inadequate.

He debated whether to call Wavell Meredith. He still had his encrypted cellphone and the secure number which accessed the CIS scrambler. But now he found an unexpected conflict of loyalties. In spite of their cautious duplicity he felt very close to these strangely beautiful people whose bizarre lifestyle ran at odds with the relics of the violent Lutheran upbringing which he himself had so consciously rejected by embarking on a life of unremitting sexual aggrandisement. He thought about Astrid and Charlotte who were probably already entertaining other men, or each other, back at Keele. The women he had met in the last twenty four hours were so different that it was impossible to make a comparison. Astrid and Charlotte were pretty and sexy, but these women were drop dead gorgeous, with short willowy bodies, firm high breasts, slim hips and endless slender legs. They were too perfect. Too perfect to be real. They were what every red blooded man might imagine to be his perfect woman. Shaped just for him. Just thinking about the sultry Imogen was enough to give him an instant boner.

Nor could he now remember what had happened during that extraordinary sexual ritual. He was vaguely aware of falling into a familiar past, but it had all vanished from his memory. How would he explain that to Wavell? None of it made sense. True, he was marginally closer to meeting Drew Quatermain. What had happened to Nikos and Ayesha was not clear either, though the Circle, as he had come think of them, remained sombre and tight lipped which suggested that the news was not good. Imogen and Lucy had come down to dinner late, but were silent and distant, as though their souls were still trapped in some lingering nightmare, and after dinner they had gone straight back to bed. Only Caroline knew the truth, and she was not letting on. Mike was in

a *cul de sac* from which there appeared to be no immediate escape.

He picked up the cellphone and began to switch it on, then changed his mind. It could wait. Apart from a bald account of the abduction of Nikos and Ayesha Devenish he had nothing to report which would survive critical analysis and if he did report what had happened on the floor of the drawing room his colleagues would dismiss him as barking mad. He thought about what James Bond would do in this situation. He was, after all, staying in a luxurious house surrounded by beautiful women some of whom were apparently available. He had gotten very positive vibes from Imogen and he knew that Amethyst was hot for him because she had said as much when he had first met her. Amethyst had left with the helicopter. But Imogen? He wondered where she was. The possibilities were intriguing. Then he remembered that part of his duty was to protect these creatures. Perhaps it would be better to give Wavell the basic facts. Just in case. When he switched the phone on there was a text message which simply read: *exotic birds in danger*. Then the phone went dead. The battery was flat and his charger was in his room at Keele. Well, that was already past history. Although no one had said as much, their body language suggested that the crisis was passed but not resolved.

He undressed and lay back on the bed for a while, admiring his dick which was also thinking about Imogen, or Amethyst, or any of them who fancied it. Then he got under the covers and waited for the knock on the door which never came. Later, much later, he woke to hear soft footsteps coming down the corridor towards his room. They stopped outside his door. He waited, wondering if it was Imogen. There was total silence. The footsteps neither resumed nor retreated. He debated whether to get out of bed to take a look and eventually gave in to his curiosity. The corridor outside was dimly lit and empty. Mike scratched his head, then returned to his bed and a fitful sleep haunted by dreams of apes and angels.

Mike Throckmorton was not the only one to be mulling over the day's events. In another bedroom Professor John Pendle was alternately reading his bible and praying. But he knew that his prayers could not be answered because there was no longer anyone there to answer them. What he had experienced was beyond belief, and beyond rational analysis. In the end he gave up and lay supine on the bed.

He looked curiously around the room. Hilary Sinclair had brought him here and told him that it had once been Marcus's room, when he had been young. It was a simple room, with an old wardrobe and dressing table, and some Brueghel prints of bleak medieval scenes

together with that startling and unsettling depiction of a medieval Icarus, falling into the sea. In many ways it was an austere room. The room of an austere mind. There was an *en suite* bathroom, of some antiquity, though everything seemed to work. He'd taken a shower and now lay under the covers in the flannel pyjamas which Lucy had not allowed him to wear in the Grosvenor Hotel. He wondered what the young Marcus had been like and wished that he had been able to meet Lucy's beloved father. But apparently he and the other mother had left in a helicopter just before John and Lucy arrived. There was no indication of where they had gone, or why. Lucy's real mother was charming to him, and was so like Lucy that he could not tell them apart. That puzzled him too. He knew from her CV that Lucy was twenty six which meant that her mother must be well into her fifties. But he had felt an instant rapport with Caroline, as though he had always known her.

He had also been very surprised to find Mike Throckmorton here, but, like everything else, his presence had not been explained. No doubt he would find out in time. He still didn't like the American, though he was unable to understand why, but James Sinclair had taken him off for a walk around the gardens, leaving John alone with Caroline and Hilary, and an elegant, petite young woman called Puck who greeted him with extraordinary warmth and familiarity, as though she too had always known him.

Later they all had a quiet and simple dinner together, cooked by Caroline and Hilary Sinclair. They sat at one end of the long table in the formal dining room trying to think of something to say to each other until, about half past eight, the dining room door opened and the two young women came in and joined them at the table. He recognised Imogen from the picture he had seen in Lucy's mind. He stood up to greet them and, as he shook hands with Imogen, he had the most extraordinary sensation of coming home to the company of people he had known all his life. More alarmingly, it seemed to him, for an instant, that Imogen was reluctantly offering herself to him. Then the hot lascivious thought was gone. Lucy sat next to John and felt for his hand. Once again he sensed that mysterious tingle, as though static had been discharged into him.

All of this was unsettling to a confirmed Christian. He struggled to reconcile his faith with the new found carnality which seemed to have infected not just his body but his entire soul. Nor had he worked out what had happened in the car, except that it was something momentous and deadly in which he had played an implicit part. He did know that the rush of energy he had felt coursing through him had changed him in some way. His mind was sharper and he was more aware of the

minds around him. His ability to navigate the obscure mathematical maps which unlocked the secrets of the universe had also been in some mysterious way enhanced. He could see more clearly now. And what he saw was not what he expected, or what he wished to see. He had always believed that understanding physics would one day reveal the face of God. But the God that was now revealed to him had nothing to do with any known religion. It was merely a force of nature, a geometrical construct obedient to the laws of exceptional Lie algebra which unified all matter and all energy in one symmetrical multidimensional matrix known by mathematicians as E_8 . God was neither the creator of the universe nor its omniscient guardian. God was the universe itself. God was a mathematical heresy inexplicably embedded in a theological enigma.

After dinner the women had remained in the drawing room whilst Mike Throckmorton and John Pendle withdrew with James Sinclair for a brandy in the spacious and well stocked study library which James shared with Caroline. James Sinclair was affable and courteous and clearly had a liking for traditional after dinner rituals. John had taken an instant liking to him. He'd never read any of Sinclair's novels. Indeed, he'd never heard of James Sinclair because he didn't read novels. But Sinclair was interesting and talked at length about the strange process of novel writing which, he believed, involved some kind of subconscious connection to a mysterious continuum from which ideas and inspiration were fed into creative minds by something equivalent to the ancient Greek muses. The same process, he suggested, might apply in subjects like physics, or music where insights often came in the form of mystical revelation.

John had some sympathy with this point of view. It was the mystery which made physics so compulsive. He had often gone to bed banging his head against an intransigent equation and woken with a clear understanding of what had previously been concealed.

Mike Throckmorton took no part in this discussion but instead sat quietly, sipping on his brandy and flicking through Sinclair's novels, looking for clues which might lead him to *Scholars and Gentlemen*, which was conspicuously absent from the row of ten or so novels by Sinclair displayed on one of the library shelves. Later, brandy consumed and talking done, they returned to the drawing room to find Hilary waiting for them on her own. The others had all retired early to their collective beds. Hilary had shown John and Mike to their rooms, and that, it seemed, was that.

John fell suddenly out of his reverie. There were footsteps coming down the corridor outside his room. There was a brief tap on the door,

but before he could respond to it the door opened and Lucy came in. To his surprise she was wearing a negligee which was untied so that as she walked towards him it opened revealing the slim bronzed body, those marvellous firm upturned breasts, the mysterious hairless pudenda and the glorious mane of silver gold hair which cascaded in gentle waves round her solemn face and down her slender back. Two days ago this vision would have filled him with terror. Now it filled him with lustful expectation. His soul was surely lost.

John sat up in bed with his mouth open in surprise. Lucy started to laugh. She stood upright on tiptoe and allowed the negligee to slip from her shoulders. She put her hands behind her neck and arched her body outwards in one breathtakingly sensuous movement. He was mesmerised by this utterly erotic vision. Then Lucy sat on the bed and looked at him, her eyes full of love. She leaned forward and kissed him, enveloping him in the scent of Chanel No 5. John put his hand behind her head and pulled her to him, kissing her with more passion. She started to laugh again.

“You’re learning fast,” she laughed, “you’re just like my dad was with Sophie. But do you know that thirty years ago my mother tried to seduce Marcus in this room. She came in here in a negligee just like this. Probably this very negligee because I found it in the back of her wardrobe and no one here ever wears nightclothes, least of all my mother. You’d better learn that.”

She leaned forward and began to gently unbutton the flannelette pyjama jacket. “Only, Marcus was a virgin and terribly shy, and he panicked and there was a row, and my mum thought he was stupid to reject her and she stormed out and left him with a massive erection which wouldn’t go away. So he went into the bathroom and jerked himself off for the first time ever. And my mum went back to her room and rubbed herself off. They were so silly. And so sweet. I do love them.”

John forgot about the bible and slipped himself out of the rest of the pyjamas, aware that he too was stiff with lust. Lucy slid into the bed beside him and began to kiss his chest, then moved inexorably downwards until he felt her lips close over his penis. He yelped with surprise and found himself already responding. Lucy stopped and brought her lips back to his.

“Did you like that?”

John nodded. Lucy pulled her legs up so that she was kneeling, straddling him. This seemed to be her favourite position. Dominant, on top. She pushed him up the bed a little and put a pillow under his shoulders so that he could look down his body and see himself inside

her. Then she leaned back, with her hands on her hips, so that the whole length of her body was exposed to him. He stared in wonder at the interlocked flesh, the mysterious slit with its little cap, enveloping his penis and slowly pumping up and down on him, the smooth flat stomach, the gently undulating breasts and the divine face smiling at him encouragingly. He felt himself coming, and then felt Lucy's mind inside his consciousness, holding him back and then accelerating him to meet her reciprocal climax which she shared with him so that he felt everything that she felt. It was sublime.

"Lucy, darling," he said, hugging her to his chest, "tell me what happened this afternoon."

Lucy kissed him gently.

"I don't know," she replied, "I really don't know. I want to know as much as you do. I think they will have to tell us. Sooner or later."

"In the car, you said we killed four people. And then you disappeared, for a second you weren't there. What happened?"

"I don't know. I think so. But it wasn't just us. I couldn't cope on my own and you are not strong enough. You're like James Sinclair. A passive telepath. You have very little psychic energy of your own. So, they were all there."

"All?"

"Yes. Nine of them. I think they call it the Square of Three. Marcus and Sophie, James and Hilary, amazing that they got involved 'cos Hilary hates the whole idea, mum and Mike Throckmorton, and Imogen, dearest Imogen, and Puck and Amethyst. They all gave their energy to me. But I only focussed it on the bastards who were torturing Nikos and Ayesha. It was Mike Throckmorton who actually killed them. He is the killer. We can't kill. We can just direct the energy. Does that make us guilty?"

John thought for a while.

"I suppose so. It is the bullet that kills, but someone must take aim and pull the trigger. I think that must have been what you did. You aimed the energy and released it."

"Oh no," said Lucy. She started to cry, "I wish you hadn't said that."

"There, there," John said, trying to think of comforting words, and stroking the soft skin at the back of her long neck, "there is no blame. You did what had to be done. You took life to save life. Sometimes that can be justified. Even Christians find it possible to justify that."

"I hope so," Lucy sobbed, "but I don't think it worked. I could feel Nikos dying. Then he just went blank. I think he's dead. And Yesha."

"Oh Lucy," John said, hugging her, "always have hope. Maybe he just lost consciousness."

"I don't know," Lucy continued to sob quietly. "I can't feel either of them."

"And the car? When you disappeared?"

Lucy shook her head, "I don't know. I don't know. Something happened. Another energy. Not from Mike. Something else. Somehow I left my body. But it was all over in an instant."

"You certainly didn't leave your body. Wherever you went your body went with you," John looked at her quizzically, "but not your clothes."

"I can't explain it," Lucy replied, "for an instant I was with them. Then...I don't know. I daren't even think about it. But I was too late. I couldn't save Nikos. I feel so guilty." She started to cry again. Silent tears which trickled down her face and dripped off her chin.

"Think about the physics," John said, trying to distract Lucy from her guilty grief, and curious to understand the inexplicable, "think what this energy might be."

"I don't know the answer to that either," Lucy replied, trying to hold back her tears, "that's why I chose to work on Dark Energy. It was Uncle Drew's idea. Uncle Drew thinks that our consciousness is a pattern of electrical impulses stored as neurons in our brains and that there is some kind of energy, some continuum, which connects with it and records our consciousness, our entire lives even. A kind of cosmic hard drive. And that we can tap into it and sometimes remember our past lives. And it informs our present lives."

"Who is Uncle Drew?" John asked, himself momentarily diverted, "another physicist?"

"Uncle Drew?" Lucy hesitated, "of course. You don't know. Uncle Drew is Drew Quatermain."

"The Drew Quatermain?"

"Yes. The Drew Quatermain."

"My God, how is that? I knew you were from a rich family. But not that rich."

"Drew isn't a real uncle. But this isn't a real family either. We are more like a commune. Everything is shared. Our wealth, our souls, our bodies. That's why we're so close. There is no jealousy. You must understand that."

"But Drew Quatermain owns the Trikos Group. It's one of the richest companies in the world."

"He owns about a third of Trikos. My father owns another third, which he split with my mum and Sophie, and Puck and Tinkerbelle own the remaining third share he bought back from Adrian Graves when he left the company. It's a kind of commune. They've been together since they were students."

“And your half brother Nikos is married to Drew Quatermain’s daughter, Ayesha? That’s who we saved? My God. I can see why someone would want to kidnap them. And you. I’m amazed it hasn’t happened before.”

“Drew kept us all out of the limelight so no one would know. And he hoped that when Yesha married Nikos she would disappear from the limelight too. My family is very good at being invisible. We don’t really live like the super rich at all. Anyway, never mind my family,” Lucy was already succumbing to her lust for explanation, “as I was saying. Drew believes that we come back. That what is recorded by this ‘energy’ is our consciousness and our consciousness is eternal and bits of it return to our bodies, generation after generation.”

“That’s scarcely a new idea. Most religions believe that the soul is eternal and comes from God. Sent to earth to be tested.”

“Do you believe that?” Lucy’s tears had stopped. John’s intellectual lure had attracted her away from her pain.

“I used to. I’m not so sure now,” John Pendle thought about the apocalyptic neutron star, “what about the telepathy?”

“Drew thinks that it a side effect of the cosmic energy. Like a celestial telephone exchange. There is something different in our brains which allows us to access the cosmic energy and use it to communicate with each other, and to see into the minds of other people. It’s very variable. A lot of women have telepathic potential, but they rarely recognise it. It has to be unlocked and the only way to unlock it is to be with a man with the same potential. Such men are unbelievably rare. But we were born with it fully developed. Imogen and I have it very strongly, when we want to, so does Nikos. Ayesha, less so, but she has other abilities. We can’t rely on it though. It comes and goes. It’s strongest when we’re with the men in our family. The older ones, my parents, Drew and Sophie. They are much weaker. Sophie is the best. But in the last three years they seem to be getting better at it too, as though they’re learning how to control it. We were always better. As children we used to eavesdrop on their thoughts and block them out of ours. Then they somehow found out how we did it and now they can block us out. They can communicate telepathically if they’re very close or actually touching you, and recently mum’s discovered that she can transmit telepathic messages through a phone. I suppose she’s subconsciously using the phone signal as a carrier wave of some kind. I think we have some kind of electrical field around our bodies which somehow connects us. You’ve felt that static discharge, haven’t you. It’s one of the reasons why we enjoy nudity so much. When our naked flesh touches it’s as though we become one person. And you know what

happens when we make love. We really do become one person. Our individual consciousness merges. And under certain circumstances our consciousness can merge with the cosmic consciousness. I think that's what happened this afternoon. I think that's what the Square of Three is."

"The Square of Three? You just mentioned the Square of Three, what exactly is it?"

"Well, apparently we go in threes. Or our parents used to. One man and two women. Mum, dad and Sophie, Drew and his first wife Yasmine and someone called Mo. Don't know what happened to Mo. She's in *Scholars and Gentlemen*, but I never got far enough to find out what happened to her. She was a lesbian who was in love with Sophie. Incidentally we're all bisexual. All the women. That's something else you'll have to get used to. Most men like it, actually. Then there was Adrian Graves, and Puck and Tinkerbelle. Except that Adrian wasn't one of us. Nikos has Yesha and Amethyst. But Imogen and I have never found a suitable man for us."

"Wait a minute," John interjected, "this is going too fast."

"Sorry. Years ago my father wrote a novel called *Scholars and Gentlemen*. It was about his time at St Deiniol's University and about his meeting my mum and Sophie, and Drew. And the others. He never bothered to publish it, but three years ago he gave it to James Sinclair to rewrite. I had one of the proof copies. It was fascinating. Unfortunately I lost it when I was on holiday. I don't know how. And there's a chapter called The Square of Three which explains what they did. That was as far as I got in the book before I lost it, and according to Imogen that's what happened yesterday, but she didn't want to talk about it. It frightened her too much. And Amethyst was terrified. Imogen is asleep now. I left her to come to you. When she wakes up we'll ask her what really happened."

"Who is Amethyst?"

"Nikos's copartner. With Yesha. I just told you. She's lovely."

"Humm..." John pondered, "and surely there must be other copies of this book."

"No, that's the point. James has withdrawn it. Drew doesn't want it published because he doesn't want the truth about us to become public knowledge. And after what has just happened to Nikos and Yesha I can see why. Except, I don't know what the truth is."

"Yes," John shook his head sadly, "he's got a point. Genuine *bona fide* telepaths would turn science on its head, and the military implications are horrendous." He paused again, reflecting on the potential of a disembodied mind with the power to project itself onto

others, for good or ill. "I wonder who actually kidnapped your brother and sister in law. And why. I assumed it was just for money. But maybe not. And do I have these powers? Am I part of this?" he asked eventually, fearing the answer.

"Yes, you are, but the men are all different. Apart from Nikos they don't have much telepathy, but Drew and dad have enormous latent energy. When we are close to them our powers are enhanced, like induction energy. Nikos is weaker, like the women, as though the telepathy is traded off against the energy. You're different again. You're like James Sinclair. You have no obvious psychic powers but something outside speaks to your subconscious and it informs your intellect. You are actually closer to the 'cosmic consciousness' than we are. You just don't recognise it, and, unlike us, you can't communicate with it directly. But it communicates with you. Drew says it especially likes mathematicians and musicians because it wants to know about itself. Maths is the key and music is the vision. It's kind of hardwired into your brain. Just as the telepathy is hard wired into my brain."

"And the American?"

"He's different too. He's like us. But not like us. His mind is dark. I can't explain it and I don't understand it. It's as though he is a different species. Like us, but different. Like an ape is to humans. So close, but so different. And he has enormous psychic energy. Enormous. Energy that can kill. And he has some telepathy. Not much. Thank God. It's easy to keep him out."

John Pendle went silent, returning to his speculation about the military potential of death by thought and trying to remember the name of a classic sci fi film he had seen years ago where an entire alien civilisation had destroyed itself by harnessing the lethal power of thought to a machine of almost infinite energy. After a while he returned to the physics which was where he felt most secure.

"A moment ago you suggested that this 'cosmic energy' is itself conscious? That it is intelligent and proactive? That it is actually inside our heads?" John's voice was level and questioning, his intellectual curiosity fully engaged.

"I've always closed my mind to that idea. But it's what Drew believes. He says we are the eyes and ears of the universe. He thinks that the universe is itself alive and that it is using us to find out about itself. I think he got the idea from some science fiction film. You know, Star Wars, or Babylon 5. They both revolve around 'the force', but they never explain it, because it's fiction and there is no explanation. I try not to think about it. It's intellectually gross. Uncle Drew says I'm in a state of denial. He's very patient, Drew. He puts up with a lot from

me and my mum. But secretly I think mum agrees with him. She's not a scientist though."

"Nature opens its eyes...and notices that it exists,"

"Sorry?" Lucy queried, "what is that?"

"Friedrich von Schelling. Nineteenth century theologian." John replied.

"Oh yes," said Lucy, "I remember. He was in dad's book."

"Well," John resumed the thread, "cosmic consciousness is a common theme in Sci Fi. And it has its attractions. There are physicists who do believe that the universe is itself intelligent and evolving. It helps to explain some of the less compatible aspects of general relativity theory and quantum mechanics. We've talked about David Bohm's theory of Implicate Order?"

Lucy nodded. "Of course," she replied, "but it's very controversial."

"Not as much as it was, since Clauser and Freedman established that superluminal signalling would be possible in a nonlocal universe. Bohm was definitely onto something. The mechanistic local universe we can see with our eyes and instruments may well be underpinned by another universe which is outside space and time but holds the templates for all forms of matter and energy. Maybe. You have chosen to work on Dark Energy. Perhaps you should be working on Implicate Order instead."

John paused to consider the enormity of what was being suggested. "You know," he continued, "I'm really surprised you are not more curious about your paranormal abilities. They have cosmic implications. I think that we should do some experiments on this. You and I are ideally qualified to research this phenomenon."

"Telepathy is a curse," Lucy said emphatically, "all the time I have to make a conscious effort to shut out the background noise of other people's thoughts. It's like having a badly tuned radio constantly hissing in your head. Half of me hates it. Half of me exults in it because it keeps me close to Imogen. And for sex it's amazing. As you now know."

"Yes, I agree about that. Amazing. Tell me. I'm curious. I looked up your mother on the web. Your mother is a very clever woman. She was a professor of theology and she has a formidable CV. She is also highly rational and deeply analytic. Does she go along with this?"

"She's sceptical, of course, but she knows what's going on and she won't tell me. She won't tell any of us. But I think they all know. Something happened about three years ago which changed them, and us. And they aren't telling us. But the telepathy is indubitable. We can't get away from that. Imogen and I use it all the time. Nikos too. But there are other things which are frighteningly inexplicable. Look at my pussy.

Put your hand there.”

John Pendle did as he was told. The mound of Venus was smooth, hairless and slightly sticky.

“It’s fashionable to have your pubes waxed,” Lucy said, “the celebs do it, so all the other fashion lemmings do it too. Only I don’t have mine waxed. Waxing is painful. I just stop the hair growing. Imogen too. And Amethyst. All of us. All the women. If we want to. Sophie was the first to discover she could do it and then she showed my mum how. If one of us knows all of us can know. Those two have spent half their lives lounging about under the Mediterranean sun. By now they should be dead from skin cancer, or at least have skin like prunes. But they’re just like us. They have the skin of teenagers. They are consciously repairing their bodies. We don’t shave our legs either, or our armpits. We can make our bodies completely hairless, if we want to. And we can control our periods, which seem to be rare anyway. We don’t know how we can do it. But we can. We just think about it and it happens. We can even change the shape of our bodies and the colour of our hair. Imogen was supposed to meet Mike Throckmorton in London with my body. But mum persuaded us out of it and she went instead.”

“My God,” John said, then stopped to consider the implications of these revelations. A trivial thought formed a question. “Why would you want to? Wax your pubes I mean.”

“For the fashionistas? Probably got something to do with wearing thongs. For us. I don’t know. Given the choice we would rather not wear clothes. They distract us from what we are and conceal the truth. Vanity is a vice. It inspires jealousy.” Lucy paused, contemplating the rationale behind their obsessive nakedness. “I suppose it enhances our psychic powers.” She started to laugh, “and it’s very good for oral sex you know. Rug munching is so gross with hair. Try it.”

“I think I’ll wait a bit for that pleasure,” John removed his hand, aware that he was already becoming aroused by the mere idea, “you’re telling me that you can control the shape of your bodies. That’s not possible. That implies thatit’s not possible.”

“Why not? Chameleons can change the colour of their skin. Why not humans. If we are humans. But you’re right. It means that we somehow exercise mind over matter. Somehow we can physically change our bodies. When we were children we did all sorts of odd things. Levitation. Shape shifting. Telekinesis. But..somehow....we seemed to forget most of it when we grew older. Strange. I can’t even remember what we did or how we did it. It’s like a fairy story. Fact becomes indistinguishable from fantasy. Like dreams. But I do know that nobody

in this community ever gets ill. Never. Not even a cold. It's weird. And I look at my friends' parents and they are not like their children. They grow older. But our parents are just like us. As though they've stopped growing old. Look at my mother. Can you tell us apart? If I went out of this room and then came back you would not know which of us you were screwing. It fooled Throckmorton. For years I've denied it, 'cept when it's useful. Now I want to know the truth. We're different, and I want to know why. It's not just the telepathy. There's something much more fundamental which they won't tell us about, but I'm sure it's in that bloody book."

"Do you know what happened, three years ago?" Pendle's forensic analytical mind was already in hyperdrive.

"There was a kind of family powwow on Drew Quatermain's motor yacht. For years he's been running tests on us to try to find out why we are what we are. PET scans, CAT scans, MRI scans, DNA tests, ECGs. You name it, he's tried it. I sometimes think his whole business empire was created just to so that he could study us. He wants an answer, and he will pay anything to get it. We were fed up with it. Anyway, he was going to report on his findings. Dad was there, and Imogen and me. But not mum or Sophie, but they weren't far away and they were probably eavesdropping. And Nikos and Yesha were too busy shagging to bother to go. We didn't care, you see. We took the telepathy for granted. It was just the way we were. It was more of a nuisance than a benefit, except for sex. And we didn't take Drew seriously you know. We thought it was an obsession. He was trying to find a way to communicate with his first wife, Yasmine. Yesha's mother. She died in childbirth. He wanted to find some way to contact her in the after life; in the cosmic consciousness. He used to go on endlessly about us being the eyes and ears of the universe. He can be a real bore especially to me because he thought my academic interest in astrophysics was highly relevant and he expected me to contribute to his obsessions. Anyway we met him in the boardroom on the yacht. I was one year into my doctorate, full of shit and arrogant as hell, and I put him down. And he just closed the files and asked us to leave. He said we weren't ready to hear what he'd discovered. And that was it. We never did hear. But, about half an hour later, all of us, me, Imogen, Nikos and Yesha had the most terrifying waking nightmare. Terrible."

Lucy shuddered at the mere memory. She looked up, as though momentarily distracted, then began to smile broadly.

"Imogen is awake," she murmured, almost to herself. "*Come to us my love.*"

"What was the nightmare about?"

"Oh," Lucy shrugged, "one doesn't remember nightmares. It was crystal clear at the time. But immediately afterwards it went. All I can remember is a girl who looked just like Imogen, like Sophie, and she was somewhere in ancient Egypt and she was being raped, and she was from the Weshesh, and her husband had just been ritually emasculated. His genitalia had been cut off and he was fed to the crocodiles. Then, you know how dreams are, I was in medieval England and I was me, but I was just a child and Marcus was cuddling me and my sister, and my mother was a witch and she was being burned alive. And then...nothing. It just went. But there was a message embedded within the dream. And I can't remember, just as I can't remember whether I could fly, like Peter Pan, when I was a child. Or whether I just imagined that I could. And that was enough to make the dream seem real."

"The Weshesh? One of the tribes of the Peoples of the Sea?"

"Yes, that's what James Sinclair said. I'd forgotten, 'til he reminded me. How did you know that?"

"Oh, the history of ancient ships is a kind of hobby for me. I read a lot about it. There's a famous Egyptian rock carving at Medinet Habu which shows a sea battle between the Egyptians and the Peoples of the Sea. They had wonderful ships, but they lost the battle. The Egyptians annihilated them. Killed all the men and sold the women into slavery. But the ships were precursors of the ancient Athenian war galleys."

Lucy rolled onto her front, propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him admiringly.

"Really? You never cease to amaze me. So clever. So sweet. Close your eyes. I have a special present for you."

"We must get hold of the book," John continued, "or we must persuade your mother to spill the beans. And we must do some experiments." He relaxed and put his arms behind his head. Sin had irresistible attractions. Lucy stretched herself over him and kissed him passionately. Through the distracting haze of yielding flesh, cascading golden hair and an imperatively stiffening penis, John was aware that the bedroom door had opened again and someone else had entered the room. Lucy put her hand over his eyes. He felt another soft warm body slide under the sheets and snuggle up against him.

"Remember I said we go in threes," Lucy whispered, "there's something else you need to know."

CHAPTER 12

There were no such sensual pleasures for Mike Throckmorton. Instead he slept fitfully in a lonely bed, woken occasionally by lurid and highly erotic dreams in which he was an impotent and enraged observer hanging from the ceiling above a vast bed watching Lucy, Imogen and John Pendle locked in impossibly passionate sexual positions which roused him to such an extent that he was twice obliged to go into the bathroom and jerk himself off. Around six thirty in the morning he was woken by something else; the now familiar sound of a helicopter landing on the helipad at the back of the Hall. He got out of bed and peered through the curtains. There was nothing to see. It was still that expectant darkness which precedes the first light of dawn. There was no obvious activity outside, though he could just see the reflected glow of the landing lights which had been switched on to illuminate the helipad.

He debated whether to go back to bed and decided instead to get dressed and investigate whatever was going on in the Hall. Mike was becoming increasingly alarmed. At the back of his mind was a more than nagging uncertainty about what he was actually dealing with. And there was now that constant subliminal hiss in his head, as though his brain had somehow tuned into the ragged edge of another cerebral frequency in which distant voices were tantalisingly inaudible. The icy Caroline had talked about being like vampires. What was this disease she had given him? He began wonder whether, like Jonathan Harker in Castle Dracula, he had fallen into a nest of voluptuous undead whores who would eventually suck out his blood and steal his soul. Yeah, vampires, or witches, creatures of the night. They had done something to him, these irresistibly seductive women. They had changed him in some way that he could not yet fathom. It both frightened and enticed him. Maybe their poison had already worked its magic on him. He wanted to be like them. To be fully admitted into this mysterious Circle.

But the legacy of the Lutheran upbringing he had so enthusiastically jettisoned with his first delirious back seat bang was returning to haunt him. For the first time since childhood he began to think about the difference between right and wrong. What had they done to him? And had it made him better, or worse? Where did he belong? What exactly had happened in that extraordinary sexual cartwheel? Had he really killed someone? If so, who was it? His limited imagination, like Pendle's intellect, was running in hyperdrive. The need for answers at any cost was becoming irresistible. Never mind his mission. Never mind the professorial Wavell Meredith, never mind the Corporate Intelligence Service, never mind the fucking CIA. Mike Throckmorton now feared

for himself.

Before dressing Mike surveyed his fine physique in the full length mirror on the front of the antique wardrobe. He had to admit that his body was damn near perfect. Maybe a bit hairy in some places, compared with those luscious witches whose smooth skinned bodies and bushless pussies had been revealed in that naked circle, but that was down to his swarthy complexion. He revelled in his broad shoulders, amazing pecs and six pack, his slim hips, tiny bottom, and a big swinging dick. Jesus H. Christ; he sure was better than most girls deserved. Fragments of his nocturnal dreams flickered into erectile life. He got dressed quickly, before he needed another trip to bathroom.

The corridor outside his room was dark and empty except for a small black cat which peered at him curiously then ran off and disappeared round the first corner. He walked slowly and quietly after it, following it down the staircase to the first floor. The cat continued down towards the ground floor and the kitchen, leaving Mike on the first floor peeking into the great drawing room which was deserted. He closed the door and padded on down the corridor until he came to the study, the door of which was invitingly ajar. If he could get his hands on that goddam book he might be on the way to understanding what was happening.

The room was in darkness. He hesitated before reaching for a light switch. He was a guest in this house. Was it impolite to wander round first thing in the morning poking his nose into other people's business? Probably, but what the hell. He could always say he had gotten up early because he couldn't sleep, it was true after all, and had gone to the study to find something to read.

The study was empty. Two desks, one on either side of the room, faced out towards the darkened windows through which the first fingers of dawn were tracing a pearly glow. One desk, he knew, belonged to James Sinclair. The other must belong to Caroline Hannay. The walls were lined with packed bookshelves and there were two more freestanding double sided bookcases behind the desks, forming a kind of cordon between the working areas of the study and the small sofa and two winged chairs on either side of the fireplace. Mike quietly opened the drawers in Sinclair's desk but there was nothing in them but notepaper and a chaotic jumble of envelopes, scraps of paper, rubber bands, pens, paper clips and assorted office detritus which James obviously swept out of sight and out of mind. It mirrored the clerical chaos around the computer on the desk itself.

Caroline's desk was much tidier, but no more revealing. He began to look more systematically along the bookshelves, pulling out books occasionally to inspect them. James Sinclair had extraordinarily eclectic

interests. There were books on history, archaeology, literature, physics, astronomy, astrology, genetics, anthropology, everything really. All of them well thumbed, annotated with curt marginalia and very obviously read and reread. He flicked quickly through Sinclair's collection of published novels, checking out the synopses on the back covers. Mostly they were about universities, or at least they started in universities. But Sinclair seemed to have a profound interest in metaphysics and cosmology so that his stories always moved from mundane openings to sophisticated and complex intellectual arguments about the meaning of life, the universe and all that, spiced up with large dollops of very explicit sex. Not surprising, Mike thought, given the sexual circus he was living with.

Mike Throckmorton's mind was too mechanical and pedestrian to take in this breadth of learning. His childhood had been rigidly regimented by Luther and his subsequent education had been narrow and focussed, first on biological sciences as an undergraduate, and then postgraduate research in genetics. He was a competent researcher, but no great scholar and he knew from the outset that his talents had long ago peaked and would not now get him very far in academic science. Once his doctorate was finished he had gone to California and screwed around on the beaches for a couple of years before shaping up and joining the CIS. James Sinclair's mind evidently lived in another universe altogether.

"Good morning Mike. Is this what you're looking for?"

Mike's heart stopped. The unfamiliar voice had come from nowhere. He looked round the room. An arm extended from one of the wing chairs in front of the fire. In its hand was large book with a cover picture of a college building and the title; *Scholars and Gentlemen*. The occupant of the chair stood up and faced Mike. It was not James Sinclair. It was a tall man in his mid thirties with a gangling body and a long and slightly lugubrious face faintly reminiscent of the young Alan Alda. He was dressed in expensive beige chinos, a black roll neck sweater and a grey herringbone pattern tweed jacket. Mike knew at once who he was. He took the extended hand and absorbed the inevitable static shock.

"Is it always like this?" he asked.

"You get used to it. It tells us who we are and after a while it remembers us. Then you don't notice it. I understand that you wanted to see me." Drew Quatermain spoke quietly, soft and low. Mostly upper class Brit, but with just a hint of Baltimore English. Mike stumbled over his words.

"Mr Quatermain, I er..never...er...expected...I'm..."

"You're looking for this," Quatermain continued, he held out the book, "take it. Read it. Then make your choice. You cannot serve two masters. And you belong with us. Not with them. But you must choose. Take the book and sit down, please." He gestured towards the other wing chair.

Mike obeyed. As the book changed hands it opened slightly. A dribble of fine sand trickled from between the pages.

"We have questions for each other, I think," Quatermain raised his eyebrows quizzically and looked at Mike, "you go first."

"How do you know who I am? How did you know I would come in here?" Mike asked defensively. This was not one of the questions he was supposed to ask.

"Not difficult. You are not here by chance. Your real name is Martin Luther Throckmorton, but you prefer to be known as Mike. We are very distantly related. You were born on the second of July 1978 in the town of Farson in the county of Sweetwater in the state of Wyoming. Your father was a Lutheran minister, hence your name. Farson is a very small and poor place. You couldn't wait to get away and you never went back. You went first to Western Wyoming Community College, then won a scholarship to Harvard where you studied biological sciences. Then to Queen's College Cambridge where you did a Ph.D. in Genetic Engineering and lost your Wyoming accent. After that you dropped out. Your father died and you inherited some money which you blew on surfing and screwing for two years in California. When the money ran out you joined the Corporate Intelligence Service as an analyst. Your immediate superior is ex Professor Wavell Meredith. You're based in New York and your current assignment is me. And you're not really a field operative. Am I right?"

Mike exploded with rage and frustration.

"I'm fucking sick and tired of people second guessing me! You're all playing games with me. I fucking sick of it. What the hell is going on. Why can't I get anything fucking right!"

"I understand that fucking is about the only thing you do get right. Caroline tells me you're very good at it."

"Except that I don't friggin well remember what actually happens when I fuck her. I don't even know who I'm fucking. Why are you people always two steps ahead of me. I'm fucking useless at this job."

"Calm down Mike. You're not useless. You did actually succeed in getting inside my family, which is what you were supposed to do. You haven't failed. And as I said, you are meant to be here. Believe it or not you are among friends who will be better friends to you than any you have ever met before." The voice was soft, emollient, persuasive.

Mike fought back his anger and frustration.

“Now,” Quatermain continued, “my first question. You were sent on a mission. What was your mission? What were you supposed to find out?”

“You already fucking well know, don’t you,” Mike said resentfully, “fucking Caroline told you. She read my mind.”

“I haven’t talked to Caroline about that. But I have talked to Adrian Graves. Tell me: since you’ve been fucked by Caroline, which I know would be very enjoyable, do you seriously believe that she can read your mind? Surely not. You’re a scientist. A rationalist. Surely telepathy is an illusion? An unfulfilled human aspiration?”

“A week ago I would never have believed any of this. Now I’m not so sure.”

“No, neither were we when it happened to us. It is still a problem for us. So, what was your mission?”

Mike continued to calm down. There was no point in anger or dissimulation. Quatermain had only to call on Caroline and the pair of them would extract everything they wanted to know from his fuddled brain.

“Wavell was concerned about you. About Trikos. He thinks you might be able to read the future. And I was supposed to find out whether or not you constitute a threat to the great US of A. Or whether you are an asset we should protect. Wavell thinks you’re all too goddam perfect. You don’t make mistakes, but he also thought that you were about to make your first mistake. Trikos doesn’t add up. He thinks that it will put you at risk. After what I saw in London I’d say he was right. And he wanted to know about stem cell research.”

“Yes,” said Drew sadly, “he was right. Nikos and Yesha have paid a very heavy price for my mistake. As to the answers. No, I can’t read the future. But I can read trends which allow me to predict the most likely future. There are many possible futures. Next, I assume Professor Meredith was referring to my anti drug therapy. Well, as to that, I have always tried to do things that will benefit humanity. Narcotics have become a great evil which wrecks lives and now threatens the legitimate economy. They are also a serious threat to my species. I have taken the necessary steps to rid the world of drugs forever but it seems there is a price to be paid for doing good. And what is the point, in the end? I should simply step back and let nature take its course. Wavell Meredith was right. For the first time in my life I miscalculated because I believed that what I was doing was in the best interests of both humans and telepaths and that humanity would be grateful. But good does not prevail because humans are not intrinsically good, nor are they

grateful for the good that is done for them. Evil is irresistible and it is everywhere. Humanity is living on borrowed time. The end of that pernicious species is approaching fast. Oh, and we no longer use stem cells. There is an alternative."

An alarm bell rang in Mike's mind. Quatermain was not entirely all there. The end is nigh was a mantra which he had heard many times in his childhood. He knew better than to believe it, or to believe in those who believed it. The realisation that Quatermain was flawed restored some of his own confidence.

"You think humanity is doomed? How?"

"There are many different options. Global warming is the current favourite. The Gaia climate tipping point is very close. Then there are asteroids. Gross overpopulation. Pollution. Nuclear war. Iran is gearing up to dominate the Middle East. It has nuclear weapons and it will not hesitate to use them against Israel and Israel will retaliate in kind. Armageddon will come at last to the Middle East, and it will serve them right because they have behaved like imbeciles for the last two thousand years. Always fighting, until fighting itself has become a genetic legacy. They are bred to kill. They have made a religion of hatred and death. Eventually they will take the rest of the world down with them. But this is nothing new. Humanity has been shooting itself in the head ever since it first came out of the trees. Sooner or later it will destroy itself. Then there's biogenetic warfare. A lethal race specific plague. That's probably why the CIA is interested in me. But I think that the real enemy of *homo sapiens sapiens* is Darwin. By defying Darwin and allowing the weak and feckless to survive at the expense of the intelligent and able, humanity is polluting its own gene pool and breeding itself into extinction. Good riddance to it."

"You believe in eugenics?" Mike was astounded by this fascist ranting, "the survival of the fittest?"

"I'm not concerned about the survival of fittest. I'm concerned about the survival of the least fit. The ones who would have been weeded out by nature. The runts in the human litter who now far outnumber the best. Look around you. Look at the feral creatures in the cities. The slack jawed imbeciles on reality tv. The cult of mindless celebrity. The universal adulation of mediocrity. It has always been exceptional people who have advanced humanity. Now it is a mortal sin to be exceptional."

"And you?" Mike had moved onto the offensive.

"I have other interests and other obligations," Quatermain said sharply, "I don't intend to let those I love die at the hands of men. Now, I have another question for you. Who kidnapped my daughter and my son in law?"

"How should I know?"

"Alright. Who knew that there would be a party at Hanover Terrace that night? Apart from those who were invited?"

"I don't know. Why should I know?"

"Because you report to Wavell Meredith and Wavell Meredith reports to the CIA. Did you send a report to Meredith stating that you were going to the party in London and giving the date and time?"

Mike sighed, and nodded. "Yes," he said regretfully.

"Then, technically, you are to blame for what happened to my daughter and her husband."

"I suppose so. No. No. I was doing my duty. I don't know who Wavell passed this information on to. You can't blame me."

"I don't blame you. You are just a pawn in a bigger conspiracy. In the end it's my fault. It was bound to happen, sooner or later. The problem is that my family, those I love most in all the world, are now at risk. We are all in shock. The only good to come out of this is that we now know that the kidnappers were acting on behalf of someone within the CIA. I would rather like to know who. And we have discovered something about ourselves which we did not previously know. And we have discovered you. And you are a priceless asset. If you choose to be."

"I'm sorry. I don't know. I don't know anything. And I don't understand. Did you rescue your daughter? What happened to her? And to her husband? Are they alright?"

"Ayesha?" Drew Quatermain's face became distracted, as though he had momentarily lost contact with this reality. "Ayesha is with her mother," he replied eventually.

"I thought her mother was dead," Mike said, recalling his briefing documents, "I thought she died in childbirth. Are they dead? Ayesha and Nikos?"

There was another prolonged silence.

"You know, we never really die. Only a small part of us is ever truly alive. The rest is somewhere else. When we die we just go back to where we came from. Back to the sea of souls. But Ayesha is safe now. She's with her mother. And Nikos is with her. But I failed them. I stupidly deprived them of the one thing that would have saved them."

Mike's heart froze. Drew Quatermain was wiping tears back from his eyes. Drew Quatermain was in denial. Whatever had happened in the so called Square of Three it had failed. The exotic birds were dead.

"I'm so sorry," Mike said with genuine sincerity, "so sorry about your daughter and her husband. She was so beautiful. One of the most beautiful women I have ever met. But I've no idea what happened to

them after they were taken from Hanover Terrace. All I know is that I was brought here and made to take part in some sexual ritual which blew my mind, and told that I'd killed somebody. I still don't know what they did to me, or what I did. Under the circumstances I can wait, but, in the end, I'd like some answers too. I think I'm entitled."

"Of course you are," Quatermain said, "but this is not the right time. When you have decided whose side you are on you may get some answers. But I have to tell you that there are no incorrigible propositions. You can start by reading *Scholars and Gentlemen*. Some of the possible answers are in there. But.....not all of them, because we don't know the full truth ourselves. How can we? We are not gods. At least, I don't think we are."

"And did I really kill someone?"

"Someone died. We didn't kill him. But we wished to kill which is just as bad. We are all complicit in that. It is the human part of us. In the heat of the moment Caroline did what was necessary. But it goes against everything that we believe in and it was one hell of a risk. You offered us a lethal temptation and we accepted it. We are as much to blame as you are and we are as uncertain of you as you are of us."

"That's not very satisfactory," Mike replied, "and why did Caroline tell me she was like a vampire and she'd given me a disease?"

Drew Quatermain laughed quietly. "Caroline has a malicious sense of humour and she doesn't like you. I assure you; you are not in any danger from us. We would never harm you. Our problem is that you may be capable of harming others, including us. We have to be very sure of you. When we are sure, we will tell you."

"And if I refuse to play your game?"

"You will not have that option. You yourself will want to play the game. One way or the other."

"And what's in it for me? Why should I take your side?"

Drew Quatermain looked askance at him, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Come with me." He stood up and walked over to the window in front of Caroline's desk. It was early light now. Thin curls of November mist whisped across the parkland in front of the Hall. Drew stood slightly behind Mike and put his hand on his shoulder. There was another long silence. An early morning fox ghosted through the dew drenched grass, a dead leveret in its mouth.

"How can I tempt you?" Drew said, "look through the window. Look at the world outside. So beautiful, so infinite in variety, so abundant in life....and death. Look at the fox. For it to live something else must die. Death...and life," Quatermain whispered, his mouth close to Mike's ear, "But it doesn't have to be like that. The cycle of Death and Life. Life

and Death. There is another way. What do you most want? Money? Sex? Power? That's what humans most want. If you are human that is what you will want. You can have all of these things. More money than you can ever imagine. More women than you could ever fuck. More power than you could ever enjoy. But if you are genuinely like us these things will not matter. They will be there for you, but you will have something much more valuable."

"Such as?"

"Life; in all its abundance. Eternal life."

"You're going to kill me if I don't agree to serve you?"

"No, of course not. Quite the opposite. And I'm not asking you to serve me. No one serves me. We are a commune. A community. We serve each other. We share each other. In everything we do. Our wealth, our bodies, our souls. Everything. Our lives are different."

Mike was now fully convinced that Quatermain was barking mad. He decided to play the game since his life might depend on it.

"And what do you want from me in return?"

"Your soul?"

Martin Luther erupted into Mike's conscience like a parasitic alien clawing its way out of its human host. He spun round and confronted Quatermain. Quatermain smiled at him disarmingly.

"Read the book," he said, "then make up your mind, "it's a good book. If you decide against me you will be free to go. Nothing will happen to you. Not from me, anyway. I promise you that. But you will never know what you are, or where you came from. And neither will we. You can go back to live in the world of men. But you will not die with them."

"Okay. I'll read the book. I'll give it due consideration. But I have two more question which you can answer now. Firstly, why do you demand genetic screening for Trikos employees?"

"Oh," Drew laughed, "you are so loyal to Wavell Meredith. I told you. Trikos is a commune. We serve each other. So far as is possible we employ like minded people. It's very difficult for us to survive in this world. We cannot lie, and we cannot kill, and we dare not reveal ourselves for what we are. We cannot do the evil things that humans take for granted. So we have to be very careful who we employ."

"Nevertheless, it seems you can kill. And are you suggesting that you are not human?"

"I cannot answer that question because truly I do not know the answer. But I think that we are not entirely human. I think we are a different species."

That clinched it for Mike. Drew Quatermain was certainly a fantasist,

probably insane and possibly dangerous. The safest thing to do would be to play along with him.

"And why so many women? In Trikos."

"Women are more likely to have the skills we most value. There are many women who have empathic capabilities, and empathy is the first step towards telepathy. But they need men with our psychic strength to unlock their potential and men like us are very rare. That is why we need you. And there are other men, clever men, like James Sinclair, who lack our strength but are also at one with the universe."

"Telepathy?"

"Of course telepathy. You know that the women are telepaths. You've already experienced it. Telepathy is necessary for us to be able to consciously communicate with the universe."

"Really? Well, I don't want to believe it. It's too goddam scary," and too goddamned absurd, Mike thought to himself.

"Not so absurd. You see. Even I can read your thoughts. You'd better get used to it. The women really are a superior species and they are much, much older than us. But they are weak without us. And there are very few of us."

"If you say so. And if I go along with you? What am I supposed to do next?"

"For the time being, continue as you were. You are actually doing what you were supposed to do, though more by luck than good judgment. Send your next report to Wavell Meredith. Tell him whatever you like. But tell him the truth. Don't lie. If you really are one of us you will not be able to lie anyway. And continue with your primary mission, which is to protect us. There is no conflict of loyalties there. In particular you must continue to protect Lucinda because I know Lucinda very well and I know for a fact that she will insist on going back to Keele. She is bloody minded and unbiddable. So, you go back with her. And protect her. But that's all. Don't even think of sleeping with her unless you genuinely love her. It could be very dangerous. You and Lucinda may be a lethal combination. You must not screw her, or even touch her until you are certain of what you are and certain that you love her. Because love and trust are essential to us. Fortunately she doesn't like you. So it won't be difficult. But, if anything happens, then she will be in control and she will tell you how far you can go. You understand. You're a good looking man. I'm sure there are plenty of nubile undergraduates. Fuck them. If you must. Or, if you prefer, I will assign two female Trikos employees to you as bodyguards. They will be delighted to be fucked by you. For the time being."

"That won't be necessary," Mike suddenly remembered the fleshy

delights of Astrid and Charlotte, “and is it ethical to order your employees to sleep with people?”

“Believe me, they would want to sleep with you. They would want your babies. They all would. So do I.”

“My babies?” Mike reacted in horror. Babies were trash. Babies were the last thing in the world he wanted, “what in tarnation are you talking about?”

“Forget it.....that is one of the conditional questions.”

“Well, it won’t be necessary. And anyway Lucy is with John Pendle.”

“Yes. I know that. I know of him, but I have yet to meet him. He is not like you.”

“And who exactly am I working for?”

“You’re working for Wavell Meredith. But you’re also working for the ARK division of Trikopfarm. I am paying part of your salary. And you’ve just had a considerable rise.”

“What exactly is ARK doing?”

“More questions,” Drew sighed, “ARK is exactly what it says it is. An Ark for the life of the Earth. Just in case humanity succeeds in destroying itself, which is now highly likely.”

“And the Altair project?”

“A super computer to store the ARK data. Now, since you have asked two more questions, I have another question for you. Where did you go?”

“Sorry? What do you mean?”

“In the Square of Three. When you made love to Caroline. Your mind went somewhere else. Back in time. Where did you go?”

“Sorry, I can’t remember. How do you know?”

“Because it happens to us, sometimes. And that was something that Caroline did tell me, because she thought it was important. Where did you go?”

For the first time in this encounter Mike sensed another mind probing into his consciousness. It was weak and easily blocked, but, like Caroline, it left something behind which lurked in the deep dark caves of his ancestral memories. Fear of the unknown curled round him like an invisible snake. He panicked.

“Why don’t you ask Caroline, then,” he replied sullenly, “she was there too.”

“I’ve heard Caroline’s account. I’d like to hear yours. That’s all.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember,” Mike struggled for words but found only images from poetry, “no...the Lordly Ones. The Lordly Ones.”

"The Lordly Ones," Drew Quatermain inclined his head to one side, "the Lordly Ones. *They are more fleet than the March wind. They laugh and are glad and are terrible.* Those Lordly Ones? What were they like?"

"Beautiful, and passive. They allowed themselves to be killed."

"And what were you?"

"A creature. Not human," suppressed memories were flooding back. Drew Quatermain had unlocked the Pandoras box in which Mike's brain stored the memory of impossible dreams, "Neanderthal? Perhaps. Or maybe....."

"I see," Drew Quatermain was looking into Mike's deep brown eyes, "and Caroline was with you?"

"Yes. I don't know. Yes. And she was Caroline but she wasn't Caroline. She was dark skinned. She had long dark hair and great dark eyes. Such beautiful eyes. Like Sophie, or Imogen. Like you daughter. She was unbelievably beautiful, and she loved us so much," Mike suddenly started to cry, "breathtakingly beautiful," he sobbed, "like a dark angel. And they killed her. They killed me. But at the moment that we died we killed them. She died to save my soul. She came with me back to my ancestors. Can we leave this please. It hurts."

"Thank you Mike," Drew put his arm round his shoulders, "it's okay, it's okay. I'm sorry. I'm as curious as you. Perhaps we can come back to that. In the future. Perhaps if we do another Square of Three, under more relaxed circumstances."

"Forget it," said Mike angrily fighting back the inexplicable tears, "I'm not doing that again. It's fucked up my brain."

"Hush, man. Relax. *It's okay. It's okay.*"

Once again Mike felt another consciousness fold itself into his head. It was full of love and sympathy and reassurance. Then it was gone. Mike shook his head. He was right back where he had started from. An ignorant ape trying to talk to an angel. "Okay," he replied, uncertain of what was coming next.

"Have you noticed anything about this house?" Drew Quatermain asked, "I noticed it the first time I came here. Over thirty years ago. This is a beautiful house. And it's alive. It enfolds us and cares for us. It protects us. Like a bubble around us. Don't you feel that?"

Mike shook his head again. Conversation with Drew Quatermain had a curiously elliptical quality which always seemed to hang on the cliff edge of credibility.

"Did you hear footsteps? Outside your bedroom?"

Mike nodded.

"You just thought of angels. There is an angel here. In this house."

It has always been here and it watches over us. It is us. Read *Scholars and Gentlemen*. Would you like to join me for breakfast. Caroline and Hilary have been busy. I imagine it's ready by now."

Mike nodded again. His suspicions about the quality of Quatermain's sanity were being confirmed, but he also felt a strong and seductive affinity with Drew, as though he and Drew had once shared another life. It occurred to him that the borderline between eccentricity and madness was largely a financial one, and that Quatermain was probably not dangerous. Not to America anyway. His next message to Wavell would reassure him on that score and the CIA would dismiss Drew Quatermain as a harmless eccentric with slightly wacky views.

"I have one last question," said Mike, remembering the one tangible mystery which had engaged him from the start.

"Yes."

"Why do these women look so young? Why do you look so young? They're in their later fifties and they look like their daughters who are in their mid twenties. I've seen them all naked. Women in their fifties do not have bodies like that. I could not tell Caroline and her daughter apart. Really. I know you're into genetic engineering. Have you been genetically engineering them in some way?"

Drew Quatermain's brow furrowed, as though he was looking for a convincing answer to an unanswerable question.

"They really are telepaths," he said eventually, "perhaps you see what they want you to see. Or perhaps they show you what you want to see. After all; *nobody here is quite what they seem.*"

CHAPTER 13

"I'm astonished that one of the richest men in the world does not have servants to make breakfast for him," Mike was beginning to feel more relaxed with Drew Quatermain who was slouched in a chair opposite him at the big table in the kitchen of Croxton Hall. Next to Drew was a new face that was not a new face. It was a face that had mesmerised the world of fashion from the covers of every glossy magazine and from every billboard in almost every place in the world. It was a small, fine boned elfin face framed by thick hair the colour of dark mahogany flashed with copper which fell in loose waves over slim elegant shoulders to a child's impossibly slender and almost breastless body. Her life as a model should have ended more than twenty years ago but even at fifty she was still breathtakingly beautiful. The enigma of their impossible ages returned to plague him. Green eyes of extraordinary luminosity smiled at him engagingly.

"We do not have servants," Sonja said, "and, when we come here, we are helping with Hilary and Caroline. It is nice to be domestic in our lives. We are a family. You know."

Sonja spoke almost perfect English with just the slightest residual German accent.

"Do you want some more coffee, Mike?" Hilary asked. Mike nodded. She leaned over the table and filled up his mug.

"Where's James?" Mike asked, finishing off his croissant.

Caroline started to laugh, "James is lazy. James doesn't get up at the crack of dawn like us."

"Never mind James," said Drew, "where are those bloody girls? And Professor Pendle? I can't stay here all day. Puck and I have to be in Zurich this afternoon."

Given the tragedy that had apparently unfolded around them they seemed remarkably relaxed. Mike began to wonder whether he had drawn the right conclusion about the deaths of Ayesha and Nikos. A community in mourning did not behave like this. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Caroline looking at him intently, and he felt again that almost imperceptible probing of his mind.

"We don't grieve," Caroline said, responding to what she had seen in the surface of his consciousness, "death is just an altered state of being. Maybe their physical bodies are dead. But their souls survive and their souls are our souls. They are still with us."

"You sure about that?" Mike queried, "and I wish you wouldn't do that. It makes me very uncomfortable."

"Of course," Caroline said quietly, "but you will have to get used to it. It's the way we are. And yes, I know the soul survives. The soul never dies."

"If you want the answers read the book," Drew said impatiently, "and go and report to Wavell Meredith. Use Caroline's PC in the study. I'm sure you have an encrypted Email facility. I'm going to look for the girls. Are they in their usual room?"

Hilary looked up.

"Lucy and Imogen have spent most of the night with Professor Pendle," she said, "he's in Marcus's old room."

"Oh," Drew started to laugh, "lucky Professor Pendle. He's already joined the club. I doubt if he'll be up to talking to me this morning."

They all started to laugh, except for Mike who still felt excluded. What had Pendle got that he didn't have?

"It's not just about sex," Caroline said enigmatically, "He has love. You do not. Nobody loves you because you love only yourself. But you can be loved, if you can learn how to care."

Mike frowned. Drew stood up and left the room.

"Listen lady," Mike's voice assumed a threatening timbre, "I don't like being treated like this. I'd sure like to know where I stand. Why won't anyone tell me what's going on?"

"Perhaps when you learn not to threaten us, we will be more willing to talk to you," Caroline also stood up and began to collect the breakfast plates, "but for now I suggest you do what Drew asked you to do. Go to the study and use my computer to communicate with your boss. Then read the book. You don't have to read all of it. Just read the last two chapters and the chapter on *Ekstasis*. You can read the rest later. I think we would all like to know whose side you are really on."

John Pendle was definitely not up to talking to the strange man who had come quietly unbidden into the bedroom to find him curled up between the soft bodies of two naked women. The stranger bent over Lucy, kissed her lips then stood back, waiting for the sleeper to awake. Lucy rubbed the sandman out of her eyes then shrieked with delight, waking Imogen from an even deeper sleep.

"Uncle Drew," they squealed. They flung off the duvet, revealing John in all his gangly glory, leapt out of the bed and threw themselves at the tall man in the tweed sports jacket and beige chinos. John scrambled for what was left of the bedcovers and attempted to cover his nakedness.

"Forget it Professor Pendle," the tall man laughed, "yours is not the first naked body I've ever seen. Far from it. I'm Drew Quatermain and

I'm so very, very pleased to meet you."

He held out his hand to the hesitant John. The grip was firm, but not crushing and it was once again accompanied by that strange static tingle which carried with it a reassuring affirmation of friendship and affection. It was his soul which spoke to Drew Quatermain. His body was merely a transient receptacle, like the place holders used for complex formulae in abstruse mathematics. There was nothing to fear. Drew had met him before. Many times. In many lives.

"How do you like these two?" Drew smiled at the girls on each arm, who were clinging to him and looking up at him with rapturous affection. He glanced at each of the lithe bodies in turn.

"You are so lucky," he continued, "we cannot sleep with our own children. But you can. You are loved more than you can imagine." He paused and kissed each of them on the lips. Not a cursory peck but a full blown sensual kiss which was returned with passion. "That's all I'm allowed. But you. You can have everything. Have you sussed them out yet?" He looked at Lucy. "This one's the brains," he laughed, "Imogen is the tits." Imogen kicked Drew's ankle but her bare foot made no impression. Drew smiled at her. "Your mother used to do that to me," he said, then, looking at Lucy, "and your mother used to kick me in the brain. She still does."

"Uncle Drew," said Lucy solemnly, "what's happening? Where are Nikos and Yesha?"

Drew raised his eyebrows and looked again at John Pendle.

"I think," he said, "we should meditate. Let's make a circle."

The girls climbed back on the bed and knelt facing each other with their heads slightly bowed. This was a familiar ritual, learned from childhood.

"John...." Drew knelt between them. John, acutely conscious of the shameful thing dangling between his legs, knelt facing Drew who held out his hands to the two girls. John reluctantly completed the little circle. The static tingle he had experienced on shaking hands with Drew surged through him, amplified now by three other souls. It was like standing in a gale roaring up the face of a bottomless cliff.

"Have you ever meditated before?" Drew asked.

John shook his head.

"It's a bit like praying. Just let your mind go blank and concentrate on breathing through your nose. Very gently. In and out. Clear your mind until it can float in space and listen to the silence of the universe. Close your eyes. You will feel yourself falling. Don't be frightened. We are here to hold you. Close your eyes. Breath deeply and slowly."

John obeyed. The silence of the universe flowed into his

consciousness. After a while he felt himself begin to fall. The grip on his hands tightened imperceptibly. He fell through silent darkness towards distant stars. As he was drawn to one particular star space twisted and turned around him until he was engulfed in a light so bright that it hurt his eyes. Except that he was not seeing it with his eyes. It was inside his head. And so were they. And so was everything that they knew, and everything that he knew, and something else. Something incorporeal, intelligent and filled with love. An awesome living universe composed of pure energy unfolded in his imagination with infinite majesty and spoke to him in compelling images which he alone understood. He understood. He understood everything. And he sensed the awe and wonder in Lucy's mind as the questions for which she had desperately sought rational answers uncoiled in her own mind. But not all the answers. Drew still had questions and it was up to Lucy and John to find the answers enfolded in the implicate order.

There were other minds here too. Those who he knew, or had just met, and others, millions of others, stretching back through frozen time to the very beginning of sentient life. Stored memories of short lives stretched out like tiny beads of dew on a cosmic spider's web which bound all their shared consciousness together into one infinite order. The universe was alive, and conscious, learning about itself, evolving. The fabric of the universe was the warp and weft of his own brain. The stars radiated their subtle energies through synaptic pathways which stretched out to the edges of time itself. They were all children of the stars. And there was no God. Only the universe and its own creations.

And then it was gone. The light faded. His eyes opened slowly and he looked into the steady grey eyes of Drew Quatermain. There was a long silence as the two men held each other's questioning gaze. The girls were crying. Silent tears which trickled down their cheeks and dripped onto their tip tilted breasts.

"Now you understand?" Drew spoke very quietly. John nodded, speechless with the wonder of the universe within him. "Lucy? Imogen?"

They nodded.

"And you know what to do?"

They nodded again. Drew released their hands and looked at John Pendle.

"Professor Pendle, I have shown you most of what I know. But what I know is incomplete and not well understood. In particular we do not understand what energy it is that records and saves our consciousness and returns it to these wonderful bodies from generation to generation. That is why Lucy was working on Dark Energy. But, as I'm sure you know, there are many alternatives, both in the local universe and in the

quantum universe. What we do know is that we are different from humans because we have a genetic anomaly which allows us to access this energy in the same way that homing birds have something wired into their brains which allows them to detect the Earth's magnetic field and navigate with it. We also know that this is not something new. This is something that evolved long ago, perhaps millions of years ago, and was somehow lost. Now it has returned because the laws of probability have brought together a small group of people who share the necessary genetic heritage and can pass it on and enhance it in their children. And it's evolving. That is why our children are so important to us and why we cannot afford to lose them, especially the men. There are many women who have the telepathy gene in some form. There are also men, like you, who can sense the sublime but lack the telepathy necessary to talk to it consciously. It comes to you subconsciously in visions. There are very few men or women who have both the psychic energy and the telepathy. You have already met most of the ones we know about. The telepathy allows us to communicate with each other, and with this 'cosmic' energy. More importantly it allows the cosmic energy to communicate with us and to change us. And it has changed us. For good or ill. And it is still changing us."

John Pendle opened his mouth to frame a question, but Drew continued unabated.

"I used to think that the cosmic energy was alive, a separate intelligence, an alien energy without form or substance which sought to live in the world of matter by coexisting in our minds and seeing the universe as we see it. Now I think that the energy was originally just energy. A passive field which somehow detected and recorded the electromagnetic energies unconsciously broadcast by our living brains. Our personalities, our consciousness, our knowledge and experience. Everything. Just recorded, like music or data on a computer hard drive or a DVD."

"But...", this time John Pendle did get a word in, "over millions of years. At least three million years of hominid life forms, but life on the Earth goes back at least three billion years. If it was always recording, the volume of data stored would be astronomical."

"Precisely. You've hit the nail on the head. What do you know about artificial intelligence?"

"Not much. I've read about the mathematics of it....oh my God....I see what you mean. Lucy, you know more about this. Tell him."

"He already knows," Lucy said quietly.

"Until very recently no one has ever built a computer big enough to replicate it," Drew continued, "but the mathematics suggest that if

sufficient data is held in a passive storage medium a point will be reached at which chance electronic connections within the stored data will create permanent synaptic links and some of the data and the medium in which it is stored becomes alive. Becomes sentient and self aware. Becomes an intelligence. In the same way that random electrical storms first galvanised inorganic matter into primitive organic life.” His voice rose with excitement. “And it is an intelligence which remembers what it was like to be alive in the material organic world. To have a body, and senses. To love and touch, and feel the sun and the wind and the rain and the warmth of these marvellous bodies. And it wants to live in the physical world. Always. Never to die and never to go back to that cold spirit place which your religion calls heaven where there is neither life nor death, nor God. Only memories of what it was like to be alive.”

Drew paused and looked sadly at John. “No” he continued, sensing the question forming in John’s Christian mind, “not all lives. Only the lives of those who had that genetic disposition to telepathy. Minds which can communicate with each other in life and also in death. Minds which remain conscious in the cold brilliance of the living universe, seeing and hearing and feeling nothing except the echoes of their own lives and the experiences received by them from living minds. Minds which can travel back through that infinite recording medium to the memories of other lives in other times. Minds which yearn for the life of our bodies. Minds which are passionate to make love, to enjoy all the senses, because they know that their time on earth is fleeting, and those precious senses wane with age. Minds which want to live in the material world for ever. Minds that learn from us. Minds that watch and guide us so that we understand the physical world and can change it. Minds that learned from us how to change the genome. And changed it. For us. You understand?”

“I understand,” Pendle said bitterly, “I understand perfectly. It goes against everything I believe in. A chosen elite which alone enters heaven. My God saves all souls. Not just a few. All repentant souls. He offers salvation for all. My God died so that all souls might enter heaven, forever.”

“No,” said Drew gently, “Professor Pendle, I’m so sorry. You do not understand. Your God became a man so that man might become a God. Heaven is here. Life is heaven. Death for us is not death, but it is not heaven either. The spirit world is just blind impotent sentience. A world of formless, powerless ghosts.”

“Don’t quote Athanasius at me,” John Pendle shook his head, “I cannot accept this. I’ve given my body to these women. Must I give them my soul as well?”

"You still don't understand. They are your soul. We are one consciousness in many bodies. Alive and dead. Remember Wordsworth? *Our souls come to us from afar, and return, in the end to their home.* When you make love to these beautiful women you become them. They become you. Everything is shared. Our bodies and our souls. In life and in death. You are one of us. When you made love to Lucy you received from her a special gift. A benign virus which used your psychic potential to change your DNA. Have your DNA tested again when you go back to Keele. Get Terry Gardner to do it for you. He will find that it is different."

"You know Terry Gardner?" Lucy exclaimed.

"Terry works for ARK. Alas he is not one of us, which is why you were not attracted to him. The reason we are so promiscuous is that we are constantly looking for people like us and trying to spread our altered genes to those able to receive them. It's like an infection. Spreading our genetic make up to other who share the same potential and upgrading them to be more like us. And you know that sex is the easiest way to find out. I think that we are attracted to certain individuals by psychic beacons. Imogen is very attracted to the American. So is Amethyst. You are going to have to get used to this too, John. You will have to learn not to be jealous. These girls will make love to other men to test them. You will want to make love to other women who are like us. And you must, because we find it so difficult to reproduce. There are so few men like us. Even the weakest genetic increment is valuable to us."

"And man humanity. Is there no redemption for them? Is death always the end?"

"We think their lives are recorded too, but only as individual events. They are...not dead....but their souls are sleeping, you might say. They don't come back. We are aware of them, where their lives intersected with ours. They are like those parts of the human brain which appear to be inactive. Which do not register on MRI scans or ECGs. Or that eighty percent of the genome which appears to have no obvious function. We do not dare to look at them. To do so would be like raising the dead. We would be bound to judge them, because there is so much to judge. We dare not do that. It is better that they sleep and wait for the judgment of God."

"So you do believe in God?"

"We cannot know. Gods are intrinsically unknowable."

"And where is this going?" John's voice was now tinged with despair, as the last remnants of his faith collapsed beneath him. Behind him Imogen sat up and put her arms round him, cupping herself against his back, resting her chin on his shoulder and looking mournfully at

Drew.

"There's something else, isn't there," she said, "something you didn't show us in the meditation. Something you don't want us to know. Something you were going to tell us three years ago. On the *Trigonos III*. Only Lucy had a strop and you sent us out. Uncle Drew. Please tell us now. How can this get any worse?"

"Believe me. It can get worse. You will find this very hard to believe and Professor Pendle, John, you will not like this any better than the rest. There is something else, which is new and it is a genuine evolutionary change. Our cosmic consciousness has modified our DNA in such a way that we can control our immune system. We can consciously prevent cellular decay in our bodies and by doing so extend our lives by a considerable margin, maybe indefinitely, barring accidents. Mind over matter you might say."

"Are you saying that we are immortal?" Imogen's voice bordered on hysteria.

"Yes," Drew replied, "in effect. I think we can prolong our lives indefinitely. But we can still be killed. I think. And as for the psychic powers, "Drew continued, "we're learning all the time and it's accelerating. We all seem to be acquiring new and complementary skills. We don't always know what they are but they come to us when we need them, and once one of us has discovered a new skill it can be transferred to the rest of us. I think Lucy has already shown you one of the more trivial applications. But it goes far beyond that. It is truly frightening."

"And that's why you didn't want me to read uncle James's book. It's in there, isn't it. That's why.....why not?" Lucy's anger bubbled to the surface, "what else is there that we don't know?" she growled.

"Be calm Lucy," Drew replied in his most soothing voice, "that is why. You must learn to control your temper. Otherwise you might do something which would draw public attention to us. We have to remain hidden. Otherwise.....you know what will happen."

"Why didn't any of you tell us?" Imogen was crying now.

"Because we have to be very careful how we use our powers. And Lucy, you especially. We must not be seen for what humans might think we are. Lucy, listen to me. Do not lose your temper. Especially when you are physically close to Mike Throckmorton. You understand? His powers are complementary to yours. But, until we know what he is, he could be very dangerous. Especially when he is with you. He is a nettle which you will have to grasp. We will need him. But always remember. It is the men who have the power, but it is women who know how to wield it. That is why you must never lose control of yourself."

Lucy nodded, "I understand," she murmured, "but it's too....awesome."

"Wait a minute..." John exclaimed, "I thought....they're..."

"They are with you. But you must learn that we share everything. Our minds, and our bodies. Ours is an unconditional love. Agape not Eros. Sex is pleasurable and it releases and amplifies our powers, but love is in our souls. In our one soul. If it's any consolation my wife has difficulties with this idea."

"But..." John's face was riven with despair, "what does it mean?"

"I really think that must be enough," Drew finished, "John, you can discuss this with Lucy and Imogen at some other time. Or, better still, all of you should talk to Caroline and James Sinclair. And you can get *Scholars and Gentlemen* back from the American, when he's read it."

"You have James's book?" Lucy exclaimed, "I lost my copy. Something strange. People I thought I met on Skiathos. Why have you given it to that bloody American?"

"He needs to know. He is one of us. He has no imagination of his own, and no sense of the meaning of love, only sex. But he has both formidable psychic energy and some telepathy. He is as rare as we are. He needs to find out for himself and he will find it easier to understand a work of fiction. Fiction is often more persuasive than fact. Anyway, most of what I have said is in there. James Sinclair understood it very well, though he and Caroline have always been sceptical."

"How certain are you of this," John asked, "do you have scientific evidence? Or is it just an act of faith. Like a religion?"

"None of this is certain. You know that there are no incorrigible propositions. It could all be a dream. We could just be characters in novel, like the characters in *Scholars and Gentlemen*. Or we could just be avatars in someone else's computer simulation. But we do know that we are not ageing and we do have a credible genetic explanation for that. That is certain. Talk to Mike Throckmorton about it. He's a geneticist, after all. It's all to do with telomeres. And once he's read the book I'm confident that he will understand whose side he's on." Drew paused for breath.

"Now," he said, looking at John Pendle, "when we shared our consciousness, I sensed a great fear in you. Something which was an even greater threat to your faith than what we have just discussed. You were thinking about the neutron stars. Tell me about Gamma Ray Bursts."

John shook his head. This was not a good time to discuss cosmic catastrophes. His head felt as though it had been hit with a steam hammer. His body was knackered and his dick was tied up in knots.

These girls had somehow managed to keep him in a state of almost permanent erection for most of the night and had made him orgasm time and time again without the intervening relief of ejaculation and detumescence. It was mind blowing. But there was a price to be paid for non stop sex. And now this. His faith, everything he believed in, stretched out on the rack of reason and dismembered by it.

“Oh, gosh,” he said, “must I? Haven’t I suffered enough?”

Drew Quatermain smiled, “I’d really like to know,” he said, “I’ve told you things beyond belief. Now tell me your story.”

“Okay,” John said wearily, “there is a binary neutron system which is about to go hypernova.”

“Hypernova?” Drew asked.

“Like a supernova only a lot bigger. A very large, very dense star which creates a singularity, a Black Hole, at its centre when it dies. In this case it’s a binary system. But the effect is the same because neutron stars are so dense. The singularity sucks in the remaining matter of the star, squashes it into what we call an accretion disc which in turn generates enormous magnetic fields which momentarily focus the energy released by the destruction of the star’s matter along the rotational axes of the accretion disc and spews it out as high energy radiation, including ultra high energy gamma rays.”

“I thought that I had considered all possible threats to life on earth,” Drew said quietly, “gamma ray bursts seemed a very remote possibility.”

“Not so,” John replied, “it may have happened before. In the Ordovician period. A GRB within a range of about 3500 light years of the earth could potentially sterilise all life on earth. The energy generated would be equivalent to approximately 300,000 megatons of TNT. GRBs are the most powerful energy events in the universe. By a long way.”

“How would it work?” Drew’s head was cocked slightly on side, as it always was when his intellectual attention was fully concentrated, “what would happen? To the Earth?”

Lucy was listening carefully to what John was saying. It was not, of course, new to her but she still found it fascinating. Imogen, on the other hand, had slipped away from John, turned over onto her side and was going back to sleep. Drew smiled at her, and then at Lucy.

“So innocent. So Sophie,” he said remembering his own student past. Lucy also smiled then gently stroked Imogen’s luscious hair.

“If it happened,” John continued, “the effect would be to cause a massive aurora of charged particles which would strip out the ozone layer on the side of the Earth exposed to the burst. A ten second GRB would be all that was needed. It’s estimated that it would then take at

least six years for the Ozone layer to recover, during which time the biosphere would be exposed to lethal ultraviolet radiation from the sun. The food chains would be disrupted. Most surface life would not survive. It's a Domesday scenario. Gamma Ray Bursts within our Galaxy were until recently thought to be very rare. But opinions are changing on that matter. This particular binary neutron star system is in the Milky Way. It appears to be changing its combined rotational axis. It could eventually point towards the earth and, if it has gone hypernova, then...eventually...."

"I see," Drew frowned, "is there going to be any warning?"

"No, probably not. That is what Lucy is trying to calculate."

"Lucy?" Drew's voice was urgent, insistent.

Lucy shook her head. "We don't know enough about the timescale of these events. The moment at which we observe it happening will be the moment when the gamma ray photons hit the earth. We won't see it coming. It will just happen. But we can predict with some precision the point at which the two neutron stars will collide. The problem is what happens next."

"Are you sure about all of this?" Drew said thoughtfully.

"No," Lucy shook her head, "we can't be certain. And in any case there is nothing we can do about it. We're like a nest of wasps about to be sprayed with a lethal pesticide."

"I see. And is this a frequent occurrence. Cosmically, I mean? John?"

John Pendle grimaced, "the Burst And Transient Source Experiment instrument detected over 2,700 gamma-ray bursts in nine years. On average. One per galaxy per century. But, as I said, there are over one hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe. If we take roughly thirteen billion years as the age of the Universe then we could expect one billion supernovae per year. That's thirty supernovae per second, somewhere in the universe. We live in a very dangerous place."

"That is a very sobering thought, my naked astronomer friend," Drew took John's hand again. "Does it frighten you?"

"Of course it frightens me. But what really frightens me is what it tells us about God. I was until recently a very devout Christian. I'd never really thought about it before. Now I find it hard to reconcile a compassionate God with the casual extinction of all life on this planet. Especially since there is apparent evidence that it has already happened before. In the Ordovician."

"Hmm...." Drew pondered, "Laughable really. The Iranians have nuclear weapons. They are about to attack the West. For what? For some insane religion which promises them immortality if they kill enough unbelievers? As you said, a nest of wasps is about to be

exterminated by a celestial pest controller.” He laughed dryly. “Is there any hope for humanity? For life?”

“There must always be hope.”

“No, I mean are there ways that life could survive? If what you say about the Ordovician extinction event is correct, that was within five hundred million years BP. Life on Earth has been around for three and half billion years. Known hominid forms of life for only three million, at the most. Is it conceivable that advanced life forms could have evolved say, a billion years ago, which were wiped out by the Ordovician event.”

“I’m not a palaeontologist,” John said sadly.

“It’s an interesting thought,” Drew speculated, “it’s always intrigued me that there are no other extant species of the modern human genera. Suppose there were human, or hominid, forms of life before that extinction event. Advanced forms. Could they survive? How penetrating would the ultraviolet radiation be? Could any life survive?”

“Well,” Lucy chipped in, vaguely aware that she had heard this story before, somewhere, “obviously it did. Otherwise we wouldn’t be here. But it might revert to a primitive stage and then have to evolve all over again. Some form of life has always survived.”

“Yes, I understand that. Interesting. But if we wanted to protect ourselves against this event. What would we do?”

“First of all,” John resumed the discourse, “the evidence of the role of Gamma Radiation from a hypernova in the Ordovician extinction is not universally accepted, but given the recent evidence of GRBs within the Milky Way it does seem plausible. As I said, a ten second burst would initially affect only the side of the Earth facing the blast but it would shred the DNA of everything exposed to it. The shadow side would be initially unaffected. But the long term effect of stripping the ozone layer and letting ultraviolet radiation through would eventually destroy all life on the surface of the land, and in the upper surfaces of the oceans and other waterways. In the worst case scenario the Phytoplankton, which are the bed rock of the food chain and produce about half of the world’s oxygen, would not survive. Without oxygen replenishment the atmosphere would not sustain life. It could also accelerate global warming up to the point at which all water could be boiled off. The Earth would die. But that didn’t happen in the Ordovician extinction event, so it may not happen now. Maybe some primitive life forms might survive. Underground and deep under the sea. Assuming there is a sea.”

“Under the sea?” Drew looked up, his downcast face suddenly enlivened by a false hope.

“Yes, probably.” Lucy thought for a moment, as though remembering something from the past. But John replied before her.

“Well, the Ordovician is especially notable for the mass extinction of sea creature. So, it’s open to question. Deep caves maybe. I don’t know. Some organisms did survive though. As Lucy said.”

“When will this happen?”

John pulled a face, “that’s what Lucy is working on. She’s trying to calculate when they will actually collide and if the Gamma Ray Burst Jets created by the collision will be pointing in the direction of the earth and wide enough to encompass it.”

“When?”

“We don’t know,” John pulled another face.

“Lucy?” Drew Quatermain looked directly into Lucy’s eyes. Lucy shook her head.

“The calculations are very complex,” Lucy replied, “maybe four hundred years. But the two stars are very close and accelerating towards each other. It could be less than that. A lot less. And remember, we are looking at events which happened over two thousand light years away. The collision has already happened. The Gamma Rays are already be on their way and getting closer.”

“Okay,” Drew nodded, “then I must factor this into my own calculations since we may live long enough for it to be a threat to us. Does anyone else know about the neutron star you are studying?”

“Yes, I expect so. The problem is that astronomers are really only able to detect GRBs after the event. That is covered by Swift Gamma Ray Burst detector satellite and GLAST. But once they began to think that Gamma Ray Bursts might occur within our own galaxy astronomers have begun to look for dying stars which might be potential progenitors of GRBs. That’s what I was looking for. And what I found. If we know, NASA almost certainly knows. Whether they have drawn the same conclusion as us is another matter. But it’s only a matter of time. No one has published anything yet for fear of frightening the public.”

“Do you need more money?”

“We could use more time on UKIRT.”

“UKIRT?”

“UK Infra Red Telescope. On Mauna Kea. And it might be useful to have some more time on the Chandra X Ray facility. That would be helpful for Lucy’s Dark Energy too. I’ve got some undergraduates monitoring the Robonet chit chat in case some schoolboy somewhere has spotted it. And more access to the SWIFT GRB detector. And GLAST.”

“GLAST? Why is the world of science shrouded in acronyms?” Drew laughed.

"The Gamma-ray Large Area Space Telescope," Lucy replied, "NASA."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do."

"And access to more computing power?" Lucy said, "the more power we have the more precision we can apply."

Drew thought for a while, as though uncertain of how to answer a simple question. "I can give you access to infinite computing power," he said eventually, "but not yet. We still have some bugs to iron out in the operating system. There are problems that we don't understand. I'll let you know when it becomes available through the network."

"What computer?" Lucy asked.

"There are some problems," Drew repeated evasively, "once we are sure that it is stable you will have access to it. I promise."

Drew rolled off the bed and stood up in one sinuous movement, "Professor Pendle, John; thank you very much. I very much look forward to talking to you again. When you have recovered from these two innocent whores. Welcome to our community."

"What about..." Lucy started to ask.

"Lucy. Remember what we just meditated about. Close your mind to it. It's happened. There's nothing we can do about it. I know it hurts. Think about Sophie. How much she must be hurting. But it's happened. We just have to accept it. We have our love, which embraces all of us. And you and Imogen have a new love. So don't grieve. They're still with us. Nikos will come back to us. One day. But don't talk to anyone about it. Especially not to Mike Throckmorton. At the moment he thinks I'm barking mad, which is what he's going to tell his boss. Unbelievable truths have their uses. We need Throckmorton, and I'm sure that he will eventually join us. He has enormous potency. But he is not like us. I think he's more like Hilary, or Fangdale. At the moment he's on probation. But I'm convinced that you and he have a crucial role to play in this. I don't know why, or what gateway it is that you will lead us through. It is there, in the future and the past, but I cannot see it yet."

Lucy nodded and began to cry. Drew bent down and took her chin in his hand. He kissed her on the lips, not with passion but with great tenderness. "I love you Lucy," he whispered, He released her delicate face and turned to Imogen who woke up, and turned her tear stained face to him to be kissed with the same tenderness. "And Imogen, my darling Imogen, child of innocence. You must both love this man as your mothers love Marcus and me. You understand. It's going to be very hard for him to accept our way of life. You must help him to make peace with his God. But his God is really the same as our God. Not a jealous God. A God of love. It's not so difficult to grasp."

"Uncle Drew," Imogen's softly sobbing voice was the mirror image of her mother, "when are you coming back? When is mummy coming back, and daddy? Is Sonja here?"

"Sonja is downstairs with Hilary and Caroline. If you want to see her you'll have to be quick. I'm leaving within the hour. Sophie and Marcus will be back soon. I'll be back for Christmas. We will all be here for Christmas, as we always are. Life must go on because life is the most precious thing in the universe. And John. You will be here too, won't you. Look after our children. They're very precious. Your universe is truly a dangerous place. But so is our own little world. Try to understand us."

Drew held out his hand to the naked man who stood up and took it gladly.

"Of course," John said, "I'll try. But it's so hard to understand."

"And Lucy, I was going to ask you to come with me to a safer place. Or stay here. And I naturally expected you to refuse. But now I think you should go back to Keele and continue with your work."

"I will do whatever you say uncle Drew," Lucy replied, all her customary defiance gone.

"Go back to Keele then, continue with your work. The American will watch over you. At the moment his mission is to protect you. Cooperate with him. Try to find out more about him. But be very careful. He is not yet one of us and he has no awareness of his psychic strength, especially when he is close to you. One day you will have to sleep with him, and when that happens you must go where he goes. I'm very curious about where he goes. But do not use his strength until you are confident you can control it. It is not the risk of killing. I don't believe that is the real threat because I don't think any of us can actually kill, not even Mike Throckmorton, whatever you may think of him. But I think that you are acquiring other powers and to be able to use them you will need him. I would like you to explore what is happening to you, but you must be very careful. Very careful. You understand?"

"*What powers?*" Lucy tried to get into Drew mind but was blocked by an unexpected psychic strength.

"No Lucy, don't even try to look into my mind. I can't tell you. We are all changing and we do not know what destiny our collective soul has mapped out for us. You must try to work it out."

Drew paused, looked deep into Lucy's eyes and stroked her cheek, "odd things are going to start happening to you. Don't be frightened. Your angel is stronger now than it has ever been, and it will watch over you. Nothing in this world can harm you. At the moment there is only one other person who shares your unique mathematical and telekinetic

skills and she is working on the other side of the problem. But to be certain of the truth you must work independently. You are the best equipped of us to deal with this. And when you've learned how to deal with it then you can show the rest of us how it's done. I think we are going to need it. The neutron star is a new probability which I had not considered. We need to prepare for it."

"Telekinetic? Uncle Drew," Lucy replied plaintively, "please....."

"No Lucy. I don't have the answers. I do not see the future. Only probabilities. I'm relying on you to work this out for yourself, for all of us. John will help you, and, eventually, so will Mike. And you must accept this John. We are not just individual monads. We are one mind in many parts and in order to survive we must work together and put aside human jealousy and envy. You understand."

John Pendle looked at his large naked feet, then returned his watery blue eyes to Drew's earnest face. "It's not easy," he said.

"It never is," Drew said gently, "but our survival may depend on it." He paused, and smiled at all of them. "Remember that my only mission has been always to protect you, all of you, all of us, and those like us. So relax. Get dressed, if you must, and come down to the kitchen. Sonja is looking forward to seeing you both. And you, John. Welcome home, old friend."

CHAPTER 14

"A Colonel Anstruther to see you," Wavell Meredith's secretary waited for her boss to reply. Wavell sat back in his chair and sucked on his empty pipe. In his professorial days he had used to smoke an aromatic English tobacco called Old Shag but had given up when a small growth on his tongue had to be excised and his doctor had given him a fateful warning. Now he just sucked on the pipe, savouring the memory of something that could no longer be enjoyed.

"Okay," he said, "send him in."

Colonel Anstruther was the Air Force Colonel from Langley. Tall and angular with a crew cut, an affable Afro American face and gentle eyes, quite unlike the two accompanying sidekicks who were obviously from Special Ops and would probably slit their mother's throats if asked to do so. Colonel Anstruther sat down without being invited and looked questioningly at Wavell.

"Has your guy reported in on Drew Quatermain?" he asked.

"I'm very honoured," Wavell replied, "that the mountain has for once come to Mohammed."

"Cut the crap Wavell. What is that jerk actually doing in England?"

Wavell looked at the folder containing the comprehensive report which Mike Throckmorton had emailed to him the previous day.

"He's doing fine. He's with the family in Yorkshire. There's been a crisis. Drew Quatermain's daughter and her husband have been snatched. As you predicted."

"Yeah. I know about that. Has he found out who snatched them?"

"He has his suspicions," Wavell replied cautiously. He decided not to ask how Anstruther knew what had happened to Drew Quatermain's daughter. No doubt all would be revealed in time. Or not.

"And who?"

"Someone in the CIA."

"Not far from the truth," Anstruther shrugged his shoulders, "doesn't matter. Too late now. Does he know where they are now?"

"He thinks they may be dead. But..." Wavell paused, uncertain of how much detail to give to a man who he would not trust as far as he could throw him, "he's not sure. However, he has met Drew Quatermain. Which is an achievement, I think."

The Colonel relaxed slightly. "What did he make of Quatermain?" he asked.

"He thinks Quatermain has some wacky views. He seems to believe that he and his friends are not humans. Telepathic aliens, maybe. He

thinks the human world is about to self destruct. Through global warming, or an asteroid, or mere human folly. You know. And he seems to believe in eugenics. The survival of the fittest. But.....” once again Wavell opted for the benefit of the doubt, “he’s not dangerous. He seems to be concerned only with the survival of his family. He’s certainly not a megalomaniac bent on world domination through genetic engineering.”

“Well” Colonel Anstruther looked unconvinced, “I’ll be the judge of that. Does Ormen Lange have this info?”

“I haven’t sent it to him yet. But I assume he’s monitoring Throckmorton’s emails to me so I guess he probably has it.”

“And what else has he learned? About Quatermain’s tribe. About the abduction. Surely these guys are shitting themselves.”

“Apparently not. The reaction of the family is ambiguous. They’re worried. But not apparently too distressed, as you would expect if they knew for certain that the kids were dead. Maybe these people are good at hiding their feelings. They’re Brits after all. Stiff upper lip and all that.”

“It doesn’t figure. Who else has he met?”

“All of them. He was at the party in London when the abduction took place....”

“Wait a minute,” the Colonel interjected, “what exactly happened there?”

“The police turned up and arrested Ayesha Scott and her husband. Mike subsequently went to the police station with Caroline Hannay and it turned out the police were fakes. Professor Hannay pressed the panic button and they were told to go to the house in Yorkshire.”

“Caroline Hannay was at this party?”

“Apparently so.”

“What was going on at this party?”

“What do you think,” Wavell replied sardonically, “you’ve seen the report on Nikos Scott.”

“Yeah, I’ve read the report and I know that Caroline Hannay is in her fifties. What’s an eminent middle aged professor of medieval theology doing at a swingers’ orgy?”

“Apparently Mike Throckmorton thought she was her daughter.” Wavell grinned, “apparently he screwed her and still didn’t know.”

“Oh fuck you Wavell. You’re pulling my pisser. How could anyone be so stupid. For Christ’s sake.”

“What are you doing here Colonel Anstruther?” Wavell’s expression changed from amusement to anger, “it’s obvious that Lange organised this. Who else has the resources to set up a complex snatch like that at

twelve hours notice?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you didn't come to my office just to get an update on Mike Throckmorton. Two weeks ago you summoned me to Langley. I told you there was going to be a party at the Scott's London house. And, surprise, surprise, the party gets hit and Quatermain's daughter is abducted. You've come here because you already know what's going on. You want to know what Throckmorton knows about the snatch. Because something has gone seriously wrong and the company is implicated. And it's getting ready to cover its tracks. Am I right?"

Colonel Anstruther's fingers drummed on the edge of Wavell's desk.

"There are things you need to know. And things you don't need to know."

"If you want my help, you are going to have to tell me."

The drumming got louder.

"Okay, okay. On the basis of the information you put up at the last meeting Lange did decide to assign a team to snatch Quatermain's daughter. It was too good an opportunity to miss. The intention was to hold her and abuse her a bit in order to force Quatermain out of his lair so that we could get him to dicker with us. And also he wanted to test out whether these people really do have psi powers of any kind. I did warn you."

"You can't be serious. Not even the CIA can get away with grabbing the daughter of one of the richest men in the world. And what in God's name do you mean by abusing her?"

The colonel shrugged and looked embarrassed, "well, you know, Gonzo sex, cum shots, rape if necessary. Sort of thing you can find on any porno site. Then torture. If necessary. All videoed to be incrementally released to Quatermain. We reckoned that would spook him out of his hole. And we had the son in law as well. So the intention was to kinda stress him out in order to get her to display her paranormal powers."

"You people are stark raving mad. You're completely off the wall. What if she doesn't have paranormal powers? What if you've killed the son in law?"

"Okay, okay," the Colonel backed off, "I agree. It was a stupid idea. It wasn't my idea. It was Lange and Barbas. They wanted a quick result. Only....."

"Only what?" The balance of power had shifted back to Wavell. The Colonel was now on the wrong foot, "it's gone wrong. Hasn't it."

"Yeah. It's gone wrong. Big time."

"So....." Wavell opened his hands in a gesture of welcoming

invitation.

“They set up two teams. Very short notice. They had to use what was available. A group of British mercenaries who did the initial snatch disguised as cops. Then they handed the packages over to Special Ops guys who delivered them to a safe house way out in the boondocks we use for pre-rendition interviews. Near somewhere called,” he fumbled with an unfamiliar name, “Oswestry, yeah, Oswestry. On the Welsh Borders. They reported in when the packages were delivered. The guy leading the group was an ex marine psycho called Wayne Kraitmann. He has training in sexual torture, which is one of the reasons why he gets selected for this kind of mission.”

Anstruther detected the flicker of disgust which crossed Wavell’s face, “I was agin it Wavell,” he protested, “I insisted on sending in a medic from my own team to make sure they kept the packages in good order...and to test out the so called psi powers. Have you got a drink Wavell?” The Colonel gestured at the bottles in an antique Tantalus on top of one of Wavell’s filing cabinets.

“Scotch?”

“Bourbon.”

Wavell crossed to the tantalus, found a couple of paper cups and poured shots for himself and the Colonel. He ignored the two silent, poker faced stooges standing by the door.

“That’s better,” the Colonel said, after the first sip. “Funny thing. I don’t seem to be able to get drunk these days. Anyway, they were supposed to report in. The intention was to feed Quatermain incremental clips of his daughter being abused, escalating, little by little, until he cracked. But after the initial notification of arrival there was nothing. Eventually I sent in another agent to check it out.”

“And?”

“He arrived too late. The cops were already there. And Quatermain’s own security people. And Quatermain himself. My guy hid out in the garden and watched. There were seven body bags laid out on the lawn. Five of them went into one ambulance, two went in another, along with Quatermain and a couple of his security people.”

“Dead?”

“He assumed so, but he couldn’t get close enough to see properly. Anyway, he hid out until most of the cops had gone. They were there a long time and he got goddam cold. Then they put tapes round the doors, you know, and left a couple of cops on guard. My guy sneaked round the back and got inside.” Anstruther paused to knock back another slug of Bourbon.

“Anyway,” he continued, “in the basement where they had the

interrogation room he found traces of blood and brain tissue on what was left of the floor. Someone had been shot. There were no cartridge cases, but presumably the Brits' forensic people had removed them. There were a couple of heavy steel interrogation chairs with cuffs and shackles where the packages had obviously been restrained. But get this. The shackles were still locked. And there were substantial burn marks on the floor and walls and round the legs of the chairs. There had been a fire, but the cops must have put it out. My guess is they were using a blowtorch on the male package. No way were they authorised to use a blowtorch. They were supposed to go slowly. Under medical supervision. For Christ's sake. We wanted these people alive. To experiment on."

"For Christ's sake, you should pray for your soul," the atheist Wavell replied, "how on earth can you even contemplate this kind of evil."

"It ain't evil, to fight for one's country," the Colonel said defensively, "we do what has to be done."

Wavell sighed. He wondered whether he really wanted to belong to such a country. "This used to be a great country," he said sadly, "a great country, with great people. Great ideals. Is this what we've come to? We torture people? Rape innocent young women? Why would they use a blowtorch, for God's sake?"

The Colonel shrugged. There was no acceptable answer.

"You know how it is. Standard practice. You can get guys to talk real easy that way. Just the threat of it is usually enough."

"So," Wavell continued, "what next?"

"I don't know. If the British cops have got our guys and they're alive they won't get anything out of them. These Special Ops guys get shit hot training on resisting interrogation. They're tough cookies and mean with it. But if they're dead then Lange will want to know who killed them. These guys are well trained and they ain't easy to pop."

"Who actually authorised this cock up?"

"Lange, and Barbas. Listen Wavell: I was not in favour. I'm Air Force Intelligence. Okay. Seconded to the CIA. I don't like these suited spooks any more than you do. But I have to go along with them. The fact is that five Special Operations people have been neutralised and we don't know how. I'd really like to know what else Throckmorton has found out. Have you levelled with me? Have you told me everything? What else has he been doing?"

"Well, I've told you the relevant stuff. According to his last report he took part in some kind of ritual sex act with Caroline Hannay and seven other people. They told him they were trying to rescue Ayesha

and Nikos Scott. They were going to kill whoever.....”

“Ritual sex!! These people are obsessed with sex. How can you rescue someone with ritual sex? What in God’s name happened?”

“He doesn’t remember. What did you mean? When you said the shackles were still locked?”

“Pardon me?”

“You said that when your agent got into the basement there were two chairs with shackles on them and the shackles were still locked. It obviously meant something to you.”

Colonel Anstruther leaned forward and rested his head in his hands.

“Do you believe in this psi nonsense?” he said under his breath, as though fearful to articulate the inexplicable.

Wavell pulled a face, “there is some evidence,” he said, “ but it’s hard to prove. And if telepaths do exist they would have a vested interest in concealing their talents because they would never be trusted by non telepaths. For what it’s worth Mike Throckmorton believes they really are telepaths. And if they really are telepaths they will be able to deceive him very easily. That would explain why he thought Caroline Hannay was her own daughter.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” the Colonel confessed.

“About the empty shackles?” Wavell was beginning to think that Mike might not be deceived at all. Like Mike and John Pendle his loyalty to his own beliefs was being pushed to its limits. He would soon have to choose a side.

“I thought it was odd. If someone rescued them you would expect the shackles to be open. But they weren’t. It was as though the bodies had simply slipped out of them. Like Houdini.”

“Maybe someone closed them again. Just to confuse you. Where are the video cards?”

“I don’t know. Disappeared. So I hear. For Quatermain’s sake I hope our people recovered them. If Quatermain has them we’re in deep shit and so is he. Listen Wavell; I don’t want to believe in this psi stuff. We once had a whole unit of so called telepaths trying to kill goats by thinking at them. It didn’t work. But now I’m not so sure.”

He looked round at the two goons and gestured to them to leave the room which they did, reluctantly. “Let’s just remember,” he continued, *sotto voce*, “why we got into this in the first place. It’s because Drew Quatermain’s companies seem to have developed a mechanism for implementing mass genetic engineering using some form of infection to change or replace DNA. If it can be used to cure AIDS and block the gene that causes drug addiction then it can also be used to target specific genetic racial descriptors and deliver lethal diseases to people

we don't like. That would be a very formidable military weapon. The psi thing is secondary. If it exists it would be useful in a military context. But it's the gene stuff we're really interested in. That's serious science. Psi is freaky."

He leaned forward, "I have to tell you, Wavell, that I am shit scared. I think there is a rogue operation. Ormen Lange has his own agenda. He's a religious psychopath. And he wants to get to Quatermain before anyone else does. I have to trust you because there is no one inside the company that I can trust. You've come from outside. You're an analyst and technically you're not part of the company. My best hope is that Quatermain's people found his daughter alive and she's back with her folks. There's been no public statement from Quatermain's PR, which I guess is good news. It either means they're not admitting anything, or they've got the kids back. But, if they're dead and our goons killed them, then we're in deep doodoo. You understand. Quatermain may just be preparing to dump on us big time. If he knows who did it and he's got the videos and he goes public...well. ... Lange and Barbas will be for the chop. Forget about all the other shit. The probability is that all they want now is to take executive action against Quatermain before it hits the fan."

"It's hard to be sympathetic," Wavell replied, still not trusting the spook, "except for that poor girl and her husband. Let me remind you that ultimately I work for Homeland Security, not the CIA. But we're supposed to cooperate. That's why I agreed to come to Langley. You've brought this on yourselves. How do you expect me to help?"

"I dare not deploy any more of my own people. I no longer know who I can trust. Throckmorton is our only link to the inside of Quatermain's circle. He's got to stay close and stop fucking about. Kick his ass. Get him to report regularly. I'd sure like to know who has those videos."

The Colonel's cellphone rang. He listened attentively, his face changing from curiosity to open shock. The communication terminated with military abruptness. He turned back to Wavell.

"The Iranians have crossed the Southern Iraq border in force," he said, "the Iraqi Shi'ites are welcoming them as liberators. Our people are withdrawing and the Israelis are mobilizing. The shit really is *en route* to the fan. I'd better get back to Langley. This discussion may now be academic. But keep me posted."

"How?" Wavell asked, but the Colonel had already gone. On an impulse he left his desk and crossed to the window. His office was on the second floor of an old building which looked out onto the street below. Two large black MPVs were parked outside. He watched the

Colonel come into view and make for the first of the two cars, followed by the two young S.O. goons. Two more young men appeared from nowhere and intercepted the Colonel before he could reach his car, redirecting him instead to the second car which opened its near side rear door. The Colonel resisted. There was a brief scuffle during which his own bodyguards stood back and watched dispassionately, then the Colonel reluctantly got into the back of the car, encouraged by the Glock pistol pointed at his head. At the last moment he looked up at Wavell standing in the window, and made a gesture with his index finger across his throat. Wavell got the message grabbed his passport from a drawer in his desk and ran from his room.

As he slipped out of the back door he saw two security men running down the sidewalk towards him. When he turned to run away there were two more young men approaching from the other direction, Glocks out and levelled. He put his hands above his head, expecting the worst. He would not live to draw his pension and he would never see his daughter again. He knew these patriot boys with their cold expressionless faces. They did not care for life, or love. They had no memory of the past or of the world as it might have been. Their minds were programmed to kill. And to obey orders. Nothing else. He closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable bullet.

It came as a flash of brilliant light, brighter than a thousand suns. The earth shook under his feet, then, seconds later, a searing blast of white hot air picked him up and hurled him down the street, flaying him against the pavement and catapulting him into the gutter. Amazed that he was still alive he crawled underneath a giant garbage truck and clung on to its massive chassis. Smaller vehicles careered down the street on their sides, or flew through the air like toys in the playroom of a demented child. Glass and flying bodies cascaded out of the windows of skyscrapers above him followed by a storm of falling debris and flaming bodies sucked up by the blast and rained back to earth at the peripheries of the shock wave.

Sound evaded him. He shook his head to clear his ears but he was stone deaf. Through the choking dust and burning debris he could see one of the pursuing goons, his legs crushed underneath an upturned car, his torso thrashing around in agony. Blazing body parts fell from the sky. Shattered cars, hurled blocks away from their original location crashed down onto the bodies in the street and crushed them before bursting into flames and turning the street into a furnace. A young woman thumped to the ground beside the garbage truck. Her flimsy dress was burning. Her back was speared with shards of glass. She reached out her hand towards Wavell, cowering beneath the truck, but

before their hands touched, she screamed, convulsed, and the life went out of her eyes leaving Wavell staring into two dark pools of blind incomprehension.

There were bodies everywhere, blown out of the upper stories of the adjacent buildings, or sucked up and dismembered by the shock wave, seared by the nuclear furnace and rained down on the tortured earth in flaming fragments. Time dilation twisted his perception of the chaos outside his head. His hearing began to return and he wished that it hadn't. The world was screaming. Screaming metal, screaming buildings, screaming flesh. Everything twisted, torn and burning. In the distance, south of Central Park he could see a vast ball of fire and above it a writhing mushroom cloud. He remembered 9/11. He had been there and seen the air planes flying resolutely into the Twin Towers. But this was worse. Much, much worse. What everyone most feared had happened at last. He tried to gather his wits.

Those few at ground level who had escaped the initial blast wave and the cascade of flaming debris were running down the street, away from the epicentre. Some had lost their clothes in the first blast. Other were dressed in blood stained tatters like medieval flagellants staggering towards the illusion of salvation. He felt his own body. Ran his hands over legs and torso. The bulk of the garbage truck had saved him. Miraculously everything was still there, even his clothes were more or less intact. He was far enough away from ground zero to have survived, but the flying debris had taken its toll. The road was full of blazing vehicles, crushed and dismembered dead bodies and hysterically screaming live ones. Such awful screaming.

Wavell staggered to his feet but had to hold onto a lamp post to steady himself. A massive coloured guy with smouldering dread locks grabbed him as his legs gave way under him.

"Steady pappy," the coloured man said, "steady man. We gotta get outa here. Else we goin burn man."

He picked Wavell up as though he was a child and ran down the street with him, instinctively putting as much distance as possible between himself and the unfolding holocaust behind him. At the end of the block he put Wavell down and leaned him against a shattered shop front, in the lee of the advancing firestorm.

"I'm goin back man," he shouted, "gotta help those folks."

Wavell blacked out. Time stopped.

"Wake up Wavell," a hand slapped his face, "Wavell. Fucking wake up."

Wavell opened his eyes and looked into the soft brown eyes of Colonel Anstruther. Anstruther's uniform was stained with fresh blood.

He had a burn mark across one cheek and an automatic pistol in his right hand. "Come on Wavell," Anstruther shouted, against the bedlam which engulfed them, "move your ass. We gotta get outa here. This ain't no place to be. There's gonna be a firestorm. Come on. We gotta get out."

Wavell staggered to his feet. Anstruther grabbed his arm and began to half run down the blocks until they came to a place where the traffic had merely stopped and dazed people were getting out of their cars to look at the inferno raging over what had once been Manhattan. Anstruther went up to a young woman standing beside her Cherokee SUV, staring, mesmerised, at the advancing firestorm. He flashed an Air Force Identity Card at her.

"I'm requisitioning your vehicle ma'am," he said with deferential politeness.

"No you don't," she replied, spinning round, eyes blazing with rage.

"You shouldn't be here," Anstruther said, "believe me ma'am. Radiation. Get in the Jeep. We're all getting out of here."

To Wavell's amazement the woman's anger faltered. She looked at the dishevelled uniform with its scorched decorations and at the very visible Glock. She nodded and started to cry.

"My husband," she wailed, "he's in the Stock Exchange."

"He's dead lady. Better get used to the idea. Nothing left alive in Manhattan. Believe me. I know about these things. And if we stay here we won't be alive either. Better get away from here. Come with us if you want to. But I sure as hell need your car. We could be at war. I need to get to an airbase. In twenty minutes time these roads are going to be blocked with folks trying to get the hell out of New York. We need to go now. Now!"

The woman collapsed into Anstruther's arms, flooding him with tears and shrieking hysterically. He held her tightly, pressed her head against his shoulder, stroked her hair, and, to Wavell's surprise, spoke to her quietly with great tenderness. The Colonel, like everyone else in this saga was not what he seemed. Against the pandemonium Wavell could not catch what the Colonel said but the woman was calmed.

"We have to go," the Colonel repeated more gently.

"Okay, okay, take the car," she replied, "but get me to Scarsdale. My folks are in Scarsdale. My son. My baby. Then you can have the car." She was still crying, but the hysteria was subsiding as she struggled to comprehend what had happened.

They got into the Jeep, Anstruther driving, with the woman sitting next to him in the front, sobbing quietly, and Wavell in the back. Nothing was said. They threaded their way through the stationary traffic

until they eventually got onto the Northway then did a detour to Scarsdale where the woman was dropped off. The still rising mushroom was clearly visible over downtown New York. Anstruther handed her a business card.

"You can claim for the Jeep, there," he said, "if it still exists. I'm sorry about your husband. We have to pay these bastards back. I have to get back to a base."

The woman shook her head. She still did not believe what she had seen.

"What bastards?" she asked, "who did this? I thought...."

"We all thought that," said Wavell, emerging from his worst nightmare, "but it was bound to happen sooner or later. Will you be alright?"

The woman looked at him blankly and wandered off into the crowd, fumbling in her bag for a cellphone that no longer worked. Wavell got into the front seat beside Colonel Anstruther. They headed back for Interstate 87.

"What the hell happened?" Wavell said, eventually.

"Don't be stupid Wavell. Some bastard nuked Manhattan," the Colonel snarled, "as you said. It was bound to happen. No coincidence. The fucking Persians invade Iraq and someone lights a nuke in Manhattan. Guess fucking who. They can fucking kiss Teheran goodbye. Must have brought it in by sea. Container ship. Private motor yacht. Something like that. Port security is impossible to sustain."

Silence descended on the Jeep and lasted for a long time.

"Must have been a small one," the Colonel said eventually, "ten kiloton at the most. Which means it was a fission bomb. Primitive. Or one of those missing Russian suitcase bombs. If it had been even a one megaton ICBM we sure as hell wouldn't be here now. We were lucky. Thank God your tightwad CIS bosses stuck you in some crappy little office and not in downtown Manhattan. We were right at the edge."

"What happened to the guys who picked you up? Did the bomb get them?"

"No, I fucking got them. They put a bag over my head. Then the flash must have blinded them. I heard them yelling, then the car was rocked by the shock wave. I got the bag off, got hold of one of their guns and shot the fuckers. Then I ran. When I got to the end of the block I stumbled across you. You obviously got away too. We've been bloody lucky."

Wavell nodded, then fell silent again, gathering his thoughts.

"Were they going to kill us?" he asked. The Colonel bit on his lip.

"I don't know. Chances are. I guess we know too much. Lange has

obviously decided we're not with him. Ergo."

Wavell shook his head in despair. He was too old for this kind of thing. He thought about Mike Throckmorton and wondered what he was doing. He wondered if there had been any other nukes. In England maybe. London, perhaps. He tried the car radio. It was dead. The Colonel looked at him.

"E.M.P," he said, "electro magnetic pulse. It's knocked out local telecommunications." He took his cellphone out of his pocket and switched it on. It too failed to respond, "yeah," he said, "all out."

"It rather makes the Quatermain thing redundant, doesn't it," Wavell said. The Colonel did not reply. His rage was beginning to subside. The rational mind reimposed its customary composure.

"Maybe not," he said, at last, "maybe it's even more urgent. I don't think we will nuke Iran. Israelis might. But not us. As it stands we are the victims. We threw that card away after 9/11. Now we've gotten it back. If we nuke them we throw the world sympathy card away again and we have the whole of Islam against us. I think we just go ahead and let them overreach themselves. These fuckers are insane. They hate each other almost as much as they hate us. They're all religious maniacs. And that's their Achilles heel. There'll be a war between the Shi'ites and Sunnis first. Then whoever wins that fight will come after the West. By that time we will have figured out how to fight them with stealth. And that's why we still need Drew Quatermain's magical bio engineering."

"What do you mean, stealth?"

"I mean that Drew Quatermain must be persuaded to tell us how to engineer a genetic weapon which re-programs anyone with obsessive religious beliefs."

"What?" Wavell exclaimed.

"Yeah. Listen. Just as there's a gene which predisposes some people to become addicted to drugs or alcohol, so there's a gene which predisposes some people to obsessive belief in Gods. These towel heads are no different to the born again Christians and all that shit. They're genetically challenged. The rational world could be well rid of the lot of them. But just suppose you could separate them from their beliefs without killing them. Isn't that more ethical? More humane? It's an attractive proposition."

"Why should Drew Quatermain agree?"

"From what I hear from you he's a rationalist," Colonel Anstruther, turned and grinned at Wavell sitting horror struck on the back seat, "and an idealist. Faced with a choice between telling us how to wipe out two thirds of the world population with nukes or some biogenetic weapon,

which is what Ormen Lange wants, or covert genetic reprogramming of religious psychopaths to make them harmless, I guess he won't have a problem. Relax Wavell. This is my scenario. I'm one of the good guys. I figure that religion is the root of all evil. Get rid of obsessive irrational religion and release reason and you resolve half of the world's problems. What did that English guy say? *He who thinks reasonably must think morally*. Don't you agree? I'm sure Quatermain will."

"I've always been an atheist," Wavell replied, "and I agree that obsessive religion can be the source of great evil. But religious beliefs, rationally held, are a great comfort to many people and have inspired great achievements by humanity. I would not want to see religion destroyed. Not like that."

"No, Wavell. It's brilliant. Awesome. No one need ever know what happened. The God freaks catch one of Quatermain's convenient colds. The God gene gets quietly turned off. Then they wake up one morning and just think, gee why on earth was I so screwed up by something so stupid. Maybe we could persuade Quatermain to replace the God gene with an enhanced sex drive. You know; make love, not war. Like he's done with the druggy thing. I like that idea. That's real sweet. Quatermain is a genius. Or his scientists are."

Wavell hesitated, conscious that he was in the presence of an awesome insanity, and uncertain of his own future, "what's going to happen?" he sighed.

"There'll be a couple of headless chicken weeks while they recover from the nuke and argue about whether they should blow Iran off the map. Then Lange will go to Chimera and tell them about the potential for using genetically engineered weapons to wipe out specific racial groups using Quatermain's as yet undisclosed technology. He'll convince them that his plan will not entail any loss of assets to our side, which will not be true, and, if the truth gets out, the blame can always shifted onto a megalomaniac billionaire who believes he has some God given right to mess with our genes. Chimera will authorise Lange to grab Quatermain and force him to disclose how this genetic fix works. Then Quatermain and his associates will be wiped in some quiet accident. And once they've assimilated Quatermain's science, or magic, or whatever it is, they'll release it into the community as some kind of mildly infectious disease. Large numbers of people with brown skins will probably die, lots of them Americans, including me. That may be good news for world demography but bad news for us if it gets out that we did it. Don't you prefer my option? Love and peace?"

"Chimera? I've never heard of Chimera."

"Chimera is a joint services coordinating committee. It doesn't exist."

"I see," said Wavell, not wanting to agree with any of this insane and unmitigated evil, "I suppose I'm with you, for the time being. But I have to point out that we're going in the opposite direction to Langley."

"We're not going to Langley. If we go to Langley we'll never come out alive. I'm going back to my squadron in Portland. I guess I might be needed. I'm hoping that Lange will think we got fried in the blast and call his dogs off. The company is going to have its hands full anyway trying to figure out where the nuke came from. It gives us a bit of breathing time. What about you?"

"I'll come with you as far Portland. After that I don't know. I think I'll go to Canada. I want to find my daughter."

"You got a daughter? What's she do? Where is she?"

"She's a computer engineer and she had a full chair at Berkeley. Then she married a Greek guy, another academic, a great guy. But then there was a car crash. In Greece. The car went off a cliff and into the sea. He drowned. She was trapped inside. But somehow she escaped. Took her a while to get over it. Then, out of the blue, she was head-hunted by the Trikos Group."

"Jesus Christ, Wavell," Anstruther exclaimed, "you had someone in Trikos all the time? Why in hell did you bother with Throckmorton when you could have used your daughter?"

"Because I didn't want her involved. I know perfectly well that everything that comes to me is monitored. I also know that she was working on something to do with quantum computers which would be bound to attract attention. I didn't want to know anything else because I didn't want her exposed to any security risks. Either from us or from Quatermain. So we agreed that there would be no contact between us. No Emails, no letters, no telephone. Nothing, until she chose to come to me. But she hasn't come to me and now I think the jackals are closing in on Trikos so I need to find her."

"I see," Anstruther's tone was one of pained agreement, "guess I would do the same in your predicament. What are you going to do now."

"I'll go to Canada and lie low for a while. I've got a safe house in Vancouver and a separate bank account and identity there. Then I'll try to get to England. I need to talk to Drew Quatermain face to face."

"Why?"

"Everyone thinks that our collective interest in Quatermain is because of the genetic engineering. But that's just one of his enterprises. If he's employed my daughter he must be interested in something else. Something much more dangerous. And he must know where she is."

“Dangerous?” “Anstruther turned to Wavell and raised his eyebrows, “Like what?”

“The Altair project,” Wavell replied enigmatically. Anstruther grimaced and looked at Wavell quizzically.

“The Altair project?” he asked.

“Altair. The Forbidden Planet. It’s a revolutionary computer project. Drew Quatermain is a great science fiction enthusiast. He likes to make it science fact. And to date he’s been very successful in doing just that. The computer on the Forbidden Planet was deadly. Maybe his is too. I just have this gut feeling that my very clever baby is in real danger. I keep having real bad dreams about her. In fact I’ve been having real bad dreams about all of them. Quatermain and his women, and Mike Throckmorton. My daughter is a brilliant computer engineer and I just know she must be working on the Altair project. If so she’s in extreme danger. You know, Lange doesn’t give up. He’ll get round to Quatermain eventually and when he does she may well get caught in the cross fire”

“Yeah.” Anstruther replied, “that’s for sure. I told you once before. Lange is a believer. He won’t give up. God is on his side, and he knows it! He’s a man with a mission.”

“I see,” Wavell replied sadly. He felt tired and vaguely sick. “Do you think we got the radiation?” he asked.

Anstruther shrugged, “all that dust? Don’t doubt it,” he replied, “I guess we could both be dead men walking. We’d better make the most of what’s left of our lives.”

CHAPTER 15

"This is fiction, right?" Mike Throckmorton held up *Scholars and Gentlemen*, "I mean, this book isn't real. These things didn't happen. Right?"

"Looks real enough to me," said James Sinclair, "but I understand what you mean."

"You wrote the fucking book. Did this really happen?"

"Why do you Americans feel obliged to swear all the time. It really is very rude. You remind me of Iolo Sarston " James lounged back in one of the two wing chairs beside the fire in the library of Croxton Hall and surveyed the puzzling American.

"Iolo who?"

"Iolo Sarston aka Owen Seaton. For God's sake you've just read the book. He's the villain, in the book. The one who kills Marcus and Caroline."

"Oh, him. The guy with hypertrichosis and a monster dick."

"Yes. Just like you. Anyway," James continued, "fiction is just the truth articulated by other means."

"I can follow the first half," said Mike in a more emollient tone of voice, "all this stuff about Marcus Ross/Scott and his thesis, and this piss-ant university he was at, and"

"And the love story," said James, "don't forget the love story between Marcus and Sophie and Caroline. That's beautiful. It's still beautiful. But I think Marcus is a bit of a pedant, you know. He probably stuck fairly close to what actually happened to him."

"Yeah, yeah. In the bits that he wrote himself. But you rewrote it thirty years later. What did you add? Is all this psi mumbo jumbo you or him?"

"What do you think?"

"I have to believe in the telepathy," Mike replied cautiously, "because I've actually experienced it. Or I think I have. The stuff about the cosmic consciousness being the human soul recorded in some unknown energy field is hard to stomach. And the stuff about their immortal souls changing their DNA so that they don't age is preposterous. I'm a geneticist, for Christ's sake. You can't change DNA as easily as that. Not yet."

"You think so?" said James patiently, "conventional molecular biologists are already using modified viruses to introduce changed DNA into the human immune system. It's virtually routine with GM plant breeding. The intelligence that gave it to us learned it from us. The

technology already exists. It just came to us by a different route.”

“Not thirty years ago. No way!” Mike exclaimed, “it’s bullshit. Fiction.”

“But that’s why you were sent here, isn’t it?” said Caroline Hannay, lounging on the sofa in front of the fire, “your bosses think that Drew has found some quick and dirty way to change DNA using simple viral infections. Is it so hard to conceive? A harmless endemic virus is modified within a seminal human host who has the necessary genes for the telepathy which then provides a pathway for the cosmic consciousness to come into our world. That host then transmits the changed DNA to others through air borne infection, or sex, oral contacts, whatever. That’s why we’re so promiscuous. We were programmed to spread it as widely as possible. So, the virus then locks on to the immune system of those new hosts, but only those who also have a genetic predisposition to telepathy, and it changes their DNA. In our case it inserts a gene which activates the promotion of an enzyme called telomerase which inhibits cellular decay. Since you’re a geneticist by training and you’ve read that chapter of James’s book I expect you understand how that works.”

“Is that what you meant,” Mike whispered, “when you said you’d infected me? You’ve made meimmortal?”

“I will only have infected you if you are already like us. The altered gene appears to be selecting for longevity and telepathy. The two together. We think. But it will be a long time before you know. If you still look thirty when you’re sixty four you’ll know it’s worked. Or we can test for changed DNA. Quicker. In the long run. Drew can arrange it.”

“But I’m not telepathic.”

“You can hear me, can’t you? In your mind?”

“Yes, but I can’t reply, not like that. I have to use words.”

“No. Most people unconsciously broadcast their thoughts. But only telepaths can hear them. True telepathy is two way. Broadcast and receive. You can do it. You have been trying to look into our minds. We’ve had to block you. And if you can do that then two way telepathy is just a matter of learning. You haven’t been properly unlocked. One of us is going to have to do that for you. But not until you also learn the meaning of love. Because it only works properly between people who truly love each other and can share each other’s souls. The mysteries of love are in our souls, not our bodies. James here has no obvious telepathy at all, except when he’s with Hilary. Then they share each other’s consciousness, as you did when I made love to you in London. Remember? Believe me. Once you’ve shagged one of us you

won't want to shag normal girls. But the longevity gene worked for him. So the chances are it will work for you."

"Shagging you was certainly mind blowing, especially since I thought you were Lucy." Mike pondered his recollections of the extraordinary experiences which had come to him during his night of passion with Caroline and Amethyst in Nikos Scott's Hanover Terrace house. "Is this what Drew Quatermain meant when he said he was offering me life? I assumed it meant he wasn't going to kill me."

"Kill you?" said Caroline, "Drew wouldn't hurt a fly. We can't kill. That's our fatal flaw. The only one of us who believes she has killed is Hilary. But it's not certain. And anyway Hilary is not quite like us. She is genetically different, and so are you. So maybe you can kill. Maybe that's why we need you. We've allowed ourselves to be killed too often in the past. We need a protector. Maybe that's your role with us. To protect us. When you learn how to do it."

Mike looked despondent. "Actually. You asked about my mission. I really was just sent here to protect you. And find out about you. Nothing else. Unless I get new orders. But I never expected this. And how much longer will I live?"

"When we first became aware of this three years ago Drew estimated the rate of telomere decay would be slowed to the point at which we might expect to live for two hundred years. But he's monitoring us, and the rate of telomere decay now appears to have virtually stopped. The autonomic systems are renewing our cells at a uniform rate and age. We are also able to actually control some autonomic functions. For example hair growth, skin, body shape. And other things. The kids are much better at it than we are."

"This is not new news," he said, "I can think of a number of academic geneticists who believe that there are children alive now who will still be alive in a thousand years time, barring accidents. If they initially live long enough for the technology to catch up with them."

"Yes," Caroline replied, "we know that too. But it caught up with us thirty years ago, before anyone seriously thought it was possible. Look at us. Even in the most intimate situation you couldn't tell the difference between me and Lucy. We're not ageing. If anything we're getting younger. And neither will you, once you reach your thirties. How does it feel to be a demi God?"

"Fucking ridiculous," Mike snarled, "not possible. This technology is way in the future. Twenty to thirty years at least."

"You really must learn to curb your temper," Caroline said quietly, "you're just like Lucy. Together you are a deadly weapon and if you can't control your tempers sooner or later you'll discover just how

dangerous you are. And it may kill you.”

“We didn’t acquire our longevity through technology,” James interjected thoughtfully, “it was given to us by something outside us.”

“Your eternal souls,” Mike did not constrain his sardonic contempt, “according to this ridiculous book. It’s all fiction. All fucking fiction. You really think I’m going to believe in this crap? I might as well believe in Harry Potter’s witches and wizards.” He stopped short, a suppressed dream briefly intruded into his consciousness, “like the Lordly Ones,” he murmured. Caroline looked at him intently.

“The Lordly Ones?” she queried.

Mike shook his head, “you remember. You were there with me.”

“Ah, yes,” Caroline nodded, “the Others. I remember.”

“And anyway,” he continued, pulling the comfortable cloak of scepticism around him, “even if it is true, what’s the purpose of living forever? The fucking planet is already overpopulated. And what the hell would we do with ourselves? We’d get bored. What would ever be new?”

“Everything, probably,” Caroline swung her long legs off the sofa, “but we don’t know. We’re still changing. Whatever was done to us is not finished. We’re still changing. Oh my God.” Pure horror engulfed her face. A blinding white image of naked terror flashed through all their minds. Something appalling had happened.

“In the Drawing Room,” she said, “come on.”

But before they could get out of the comfortable sofas the study door slammed open and a white faced Imogen rushed in.

“You’d better come,” she cried, “Mike. Oh, Mike, your people. It’s awful. There’s been a bomb in Manhattan. They think it’s a nuke. There are hundreds of thousands dead. It’s awful, awful.” She began to sob, “so many dead. And all of our people in Drew’s New York office. Vaporised. I felt them die. And all the others. The normals. So many.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mike yelled, “where?”

“On CNN. In the Drawing Room,” Imogen sobbed.

Caroline put her arm round Imogen and followed Mike and James as they ran down the corridor.

In the Drawing Room Hilary and Lucy were slumped on the big sofa facing the television in the alcove beside the fireplace, their arms round each other, their eyes streaming with tears. Imogen grabbed Mike’s hand.

“Sit with me,” she said, pulling Mike onto the sofa beside Hilary and Lucy. Imogen held on to Mike’s hand. Caroline and James joined a stone faced John Pendle standing behind the sofa. Together they watched the horror unfolding on the big television. It was truly appalling. After a while the repeated clips of screaming people, raging fires, helpless

rescuers, collapsing buildings and howling sirens paralysed the mind. It was 9/11 all over again. That had been bad enough but this time it was devastating. Helicopters relayed images of the firestorm which had once been Manhattan. Blast and heat damage engulfed blocks up to three miles radius from the epicentre, almost to the edge of the Bronx. Nothing new came out of it. Only hysterical commentators shouting the odds and looking for someone to blame.

Expert talking heads were wheeled in. The fall guy was easily found. Iran. Iran. Had it been a missile? Too small for a missile someone opined. Maybe a home made terrorist bomb. Or one of those Russian suitcase bombs that had disappeared from Ukrainian nuclear inventories. Or Chinese. Maybe the Chinese had given Iran a bomb. Or North Korea. Yeah, North Korea. Fresh news came. Reports were filtering in of Israeli F15s hitting the Iranian nuclear sites at Natanz and Arak with one kiloton nuclear bunker busters. Stock shots of departing warplanes roared across the screen for several minutes.

“Too late,” said Mike, “too late. If they’ve got any more bombs they won’t be there. My God,” he muttered, “my God. It’s actually happened.”

Imogen’s hand was still tightly entwined round his fingers. Her touch was comforting. An extraordinary energy flowed from her. An energy charged with infinite love and warmth and compassion. She looked up at him with tear stained eyes and tried to smile. Her pity came into his head not as words but as images of comfort and reassurance. He held her hand tightly.

An Al-Qaeda spokesman appeared on the Al Jazeera feed. “Today is a day which will live in eternal glory,” he declaimed, “today Allah has taken the fire of hell into the belly of the Great Satan. Allah is Great. Allah is Merciful. Praise be to Allah. And to the Prophet Mohammed. Peace be upon him.”

“Do you think it’s Al-Qaeda,” said James, looking thoughtfully at Mike.

“Al-Qaeda is Sunni. Iran is Shia,” Mike replied, “they’ve never worked together before. But there’s always a first time. Remember. My enemy’s enemy is my friend. It’s an Arab saying. I doubt if it’s that simple. Nevertheless, if they have buried the hatchet the West has got big problems,” Mike continued, “we used to get briefings on this. The scuttlebutt in Washington was that the administration was going to let the civil war happen in Iraq and quietly withdraw the alliance troops..and..”

“Why, for God’s sake,” Hilary asked, between sobs.

“Al-Qaeda’s main objective has always been to topple the corrupt

Sunni dictatorships in the Gulf,” James replied, beating Mike to the podium, “and convert, or more likely behead, all those moderate Muslims who do not conform to Wahhabist fundamentalism. They are heretics and traitors to Islam. Especially the Shia. The West has always been a secondary objective. Until we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, that is. That gave Bin Laden an ace he could sell to the whole Muslim world. We played right into his hands. If we withdraw from Iraq the Sunni and Shia extremist will be brought face to face and there will be a civil war to settle ancient feuds and root out heretics. But, as Mike says, Al-Qaeda would also find itself face to face with Iranian Shi’ites. And within the Middle East Iran has ambitions to be a superpower. They hate each other as much as Protestants hated Catholics in seventeenth century Europe. And their leaders are driven by fanaticism, not reason. That, actually, is their greatest weakness. They’re riddled with paranoia and self loathing. In the long term reason will prevail against insanity. But in the short term it’s not in our interests to cripple Iran militarily. Not yet. The big Sunni states, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, will come to the aid of the Iraqi Sunnis and will probably end up in a war with Iran. There’ll be a lot of death and destruction. But the rest of the world will see that it’s Muslims against Muslims, and not Western aggrandisement.”

“That is a very cynical view,” Caroline whispered, “I can see why you were a historian.”

James shrugged, “historians are paid to think the unthinkable. Anyway, nothing ever changes because humanity never learns from history. If I was going to be really cynical I would guess that the New York bomb was detonated by Al-Qaeda when the Iranians invaded Southern Iraq with the deliberate intention of provoking the Americans into nuking the Persians. Which would, of course, simultaneously unite all Muslims against the Great Satan and cripple Iran, which is the main obstacle to Al-Qaeda domination of the Muslim world.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” said Mike, “but how would they know when the Iranians were going to invade Iraq. It takes time to set up an operation to deliver any bomb. Let alone a nuclear bomb.”

“Not if the weapon was already in Manhattan, or somewhere close, and ready to go. Waiting for the right moment. All you would need then is someone to sit by the phone and press the button. Plenty of fanatics willing to die for such a triumph of hate.”

“Jesus! You could be right. There was a scare in two thousand and one when a CIA agent called Dragonfire told the President that Al-Qaeda had gotten a nuke into the States. Turned out to be a false alarm. That’s why they created NEST.”

“NEST?” Caroline queried, “bloody acronyms. I’m sure the Americans have degrees in acronymy.”

“Nuclear Emergency Search Team,” Mike replied, “they have high tech gear to monitor the movement of nuclear weapons and material.”

“Maybe this one got past them. Well, obviously it got past them,” James said, “it could have been there for a long time. Or in a boat, or something. Who knows.”

“There might be some low level radiation,” said John Pendle, “which NEST might be able to detect. But it can be easily shielded from even the most sophisticated detectors. My guess is that if it was already in the States it could be delivered to almost any target without detection.”

“Yeah. That’s true,” Mike mused, “but every nuclear weapon also has a unique build signature. So it will be possible to figure out who made it from the nuclear debris. I imagine someone is working on that right now.”

“Only where we already have template fission products from bombs which have been tested,” John retorted, “neither North Korea or Iran have tested a proper bomb. We’d know if they had. Satellite detectors, you know. My guess is that it’s a Russian suitcase bomb. Or a salvaged tactical artillery shell.”

“Why do you think that?” James asked.

“Because it’s much easier to make big nuclear weapons than small ones. The one dropped on Hiroshima was in the order of twenty kilotons. Judging from the damage we’ve seen this one was much smaller. And only advanced nuclear states have the technology to build small low yield weapons. Iran does not have the technology to build a small nuke. If it had been a genuine Iranian bomb there would be a lot more damage. It’s bad enough. But my guess is Russian. That doesn’t preclude Iran or Al-Qaeda delivering it though. They just got it from somewhere else. It’ll be interesting to see what the Russians have to say if turns out to be one of their missing suitcase bombs.”

“Oh,” said Hilary in tearful exasperation, “you’re doing what you academics always do. Something terrible happens and all you can do is debate about it.”

“Well,” James said apologetically, “what else can we do?”

Hilary did not reply immediately.

“Fact is, though” Mike said regretfully, “if these assholes really have sunk their differences we have a serious problem. The worst possible thing we could do now would be to retaliate in kind. James is right. If we start nuking Iran that will certainly unite the whole Muslim world against us.”

“Let’s hope that calm heads prevail in your Government,” John

Pendle said, "and in ours."

"You could think about all those people who've lost their loved ones." Hilar said eventually, "all those poor dead people. And all those broken families. All those women whose husbands and lovers and children will not come home today. All those men and women whose love has been taken from them."

Imogen's fingers tightened their grip on Mike's hand. She looked up at him, slumped in the soft sofa, his face riven with grief and anger.

"Do you have family?" she asked softly, "in New York. Friends. Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry." The warm body nestled up against him like a living comfort blanket. Luxuriant dark hair wafted across his face. Gentle grey eyes searched into his soul.

"No," Mike replied, "no family. I had friends there. Girl friends. And guys I know. And my boss. I wonder what has happened to my boss." To his own astonishment Mike Throckmorton began to cry. Not hysterical sobs, but his face twisted in silent pain and hot tears trickled down his cheeks. He brushed them away with the back of hand but they did not stop. Imogen stood up and pulled Mike up after her.

"I'm very frightened," Imogen said quietly, "come with me. Please." The broken Mike followed obediently. As the two of them left the room Lucy turned and looked anxiously at John Pendle, still standing silently behind the sofa, next to Caroline and James. Pendle's face was also a riot of pained incredulity as he struggled to understand how this beautiful woman who had only just given her body to him could now be about to do the same to another man. Lucy stood up and came round the back of the sofa to him. She stood in front of him and took his hands in hers.

"Don't be upset about Imogen," she said, "we do not belong to each other. But we do love each other. It's love that binds us. Not sex. All of us. Unconditional love. No jealousy. You understand. And that includes Mike, whether we like him or not he's one of us. We must love him and he must learn to love us. All of us. He's beginning to learn what it means to care for others. At this moment he needs Imogen's love. Let it go. Imogen will come back to us. When she chooses. I love her too, you know. I don't want her to go with him. But perhaps she has to. We have to love one another. It's our first commandment."

John nodded reluctantly.

"Then, you must come with me too."

When they had gone Caroline and James sat down on the sofa on either side of Hilary. James retrieved the remote control from its hiding place between the cushions and switched off the endlessly recycling

television images.

“What will happen now?” Hilary asked, slipping her hand into the comforting hand of her husband.

James shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, “depends on how the President reacts. I hope to God they don’t start sending the nukes.”

“No,” said Hilary, “I meant for the rest of the world. For us.”

“Well,” James thought for a while, “there’ll be chaos in New York for a time. But the Americans usually pull together in situations like this. They did after 9/11. And a lot was learned then. They aren’t going to do anything rash. In theory there could be a global financial collapse because the bomb will have taken out the entire banking district in Manhattan. And there will certainly be financial chaos, temporarily. But I would expect that the banks and corporate institutions in New York have staff and multiple computer backup elsewhere. Probably on the West coast. It won’t take long to reestablish the Stock Exchange and the major commercial banks. These people are not stupid. They will have learned their lessons. But they will also have lost a great many key people. There’s going to be a rocky ride. And democracy may take another hit. I wonder where Drew is. My God!! I hope he wasn’t in New York.”

“No,” Caroline said, “he was going back to Zurich with Puck and Sonja, and then to Alonissos to join Sophie and Marcus. He rarely goes to the States. And anyway I would have felt it if anything had happened to him. Drew is okay.”

James nodded. “Mike was right,” he said, “it must have been a small bomb. A conventional ICBM one megaton fusion bomb air burst over New York would probably kill instantly over two million people and seriously injure three and half million more. Anyone within around eight miles of the blast would get third-degree burns. Most buildings within a five mile radius would be destroyed. But this was much smaller. Ten kilotons or less. Apart from radiation, the blast and heat effects would not go much further than a couple of miles, if that. After that the high rise buildings would progressively absorb most of the flash and blast damage. People on the higher floors might blown out or sucked out by the blast wave. People lower down and on the ground would probably be okay, unless they got hit by falling debris. Then there’s the radiation, or course. And the firestorm.”

“Still a lot of dead people,” Hilary was crying again. James put her arm round her and hugged her.

“A lot. Manhattan is one of the most densely populated places in the world. If you include all those who come into Manhattan to work, maybe half a million. Maybe more. I don’t know.”

"How do you know about all of these things, James?" Caroline looked at him quizzically.

"I write novels," James replied succinctly.

"And us? England?" Hilary asked

"Well. America has not been destroyed. Life will go on. I expect. There'll be more security alerts and that kind of thing, and probably some economic hardship. But it's not like an all out nuclear war. It rather depends on what the Americans do next. And whether there are anymore nuclear suitcase bombs out there."

They sat in silence for a while, Hilary didn't normally cry about anything, unlike Sophie and Imogen who would cry at the fall of a sparrow, but she was still sobbing. Caroline put her arm round Hilary's shoulder.

"We need to think about something else," Caroline said. Hilary nodded. "I think Lucy and Imogen had the right idea," Caroline's voice was softly seductive.

"You know I won't do that," Hilary sobbed, "I've never agreed with that. I don't mind the nude meditation, and all that. But I won't share James."

Caroline looked at James. "Do you remember," she said, "when we were all young we used to give our bodies to sad people just to cheer them up."

James remembered only too well, even though it was over thirty years since he had lain beside Caroline after his first wife had died, and Caroline had made love to him. Hilary knew about this, of course, because they had no secrets from each other. But Hilary had never really come to terms with the intimate polyamorous relationship between Marcus and Sophie and Caroline and Drew Quatermain and still could not understand how four people could love each equally, without any hint of jealousy.

"We'll just go to bed together," Caroline said gently, "just be together and hold each other." She stroked Hilary's cheek with the back of her hand, "and if you want to you can make love to James, and I will share it with you. And I can make love to you and we can both share it with James. You've never really crossed that barrier, have you. Never really been a full part of us. Never fully shared our consciousness."

Hilary shook her head. Silent tears trickled down her cheeks.

"They're making love," Caroline continued, "can't you feel them? Open your mind and let them in. It's beautiful. Isn't it."

Hilary allowed her psychic guard to slip as it had done, so long ago, when she had first met Caroline and Sophie. At the fringes of her soul

she momentarily experienced the gentle passion flowing between the young people in the bedrooms above them. She felt the clinging warmth of their bodies, the luscious kisses, the sensuous slither of naked breasts brushing over naked skin, the stiff thrill of erect men penetrating the gentle yielding bodies, the endless shared orgasm, the melting flesh merging into one soul. She turned to Caroline and nodded.

"I remember," she said, "long ago, here, in this house, by the swimming pool, when I first met you and Sophie and you first came into my mind and freed me of my demons. I remember how beautiful it was. I thought then that you were lesbians. And I wondered what it would be like. To make love to a woman. I'm content with James. But still, I've always wondered."

"It's very restful," Caroline said sadly, "you know that we are one family. One family. We share everything. Our bodies and our souls. And at this moment we need the peace our bodies can sometimes bring to our souls. I'm frightened too. We all are. I desperately need to make love to someone. So do you. So does James. We need to affirm life. Come with me. Please. James. You too."

CHAPTER 16

In Imogen's bedroom at Croxton Hall Mike Throckmorton propped himself up on one arm and looked at the woman sleeping beside him. She was, without doubt, one of the most beautiful women he had ever slept with. He didn't normally look much at women's faces, subscribing instead to the chauvinist notion that it was not necessary to look at the mantelpiece whilst poking the fire. So his eyes were generally drawn to breasts and legs which were, in the opinion of his insatiably misguided missile, more pleasurable than faces. This woman had the best of these in spades. Her breasts were large, but not too large, high and firm, and tipped with dark brown nipples encircled by large areola. Her torso was short and snake hipped; thighs and legs slim and endless. The whole delicious package was encased in a soft and flawless skin, tanned to a uniform golden brown, even down to the hairless pudenda from which he had so recently withdrawn his own exhausted flesh. Her body was as near perfect as any he had ever seen, and he had seen far more than his fair share. She was every man's lewdest dream.

But now, now, it was her face that fascinated him. It was both childishly innocent and unbelievably sexy. Small and delicate, framed in soft wavy black hair flecked with rays of auburn. A Mediterranean face, Greek, or Italian, but squarer and with a stronger jaw line and a luscious kissable mouth. And how she had kissed. Beyond his wildest imagination. And how she had fucked. Not the violent rumpy pumpy he was used to, or the strangely tantric sex he had experienced with the enigmatic Caroline. This creature flowed into him as though her whole body had become a symbiot, absorbing him into her own flesh and sharing every living cell of it with him. She gave him everything she had to give. Her flesh and her soul. And it lasted for ever. Slow, gentle and unrelenting. When they did eventually climax it was not with a sudden orgasmic explosion but with languorous waves of escalating passion until both bodies became one and surfed down a whiteout of sublime ecstasy which catapulted their minds into infinity. For an instant Mike felt himself beginning to fall again into that dark spiral down which Caroline had taken him to he knew not where. But this time the consciousness that travelled with him held him back and stood beside him in on the edge of a coruscating whiteness so brilliant that it seared his eyes. Except that he had no eyes. No ears. No touch. No senses at all. What he saw and felt was all in his mind and he saw it all with the clarity of the sharpest dream.

"This is what it's like" her mind whispered, *"this is where we came*

from and where we go to. This is death. And life. And love. And there is nothing here but love. Infinite love."

He felt the conscious presence of innumerable souls united into one sentient consciousness, as old as time, folding round him, aware, intelligent, watching, waiting for their turn to enjoy the sparrow flight through the life of flesh. He was overwhelmed with a sublime love for all life, and for this life in particular. Then the brightness faded and he fell back into a dreamless sleep. Now, awake and filled with unaccustomed tenderness, he gently traced the contours of her face with his fingers. Her forehead, the dark brown black eyebrows, the delicate high cheekbones, the lips, the small straight nose, the strong square chin. The gorgeous sleek dark hair. It was a face familiar from the forgotten dreams at the end of that temporal lift shaft that had twice taken him back to his beginning. It was the face of all the women in that strange circle, the nine bodies, three male, six female. The Square of Three. It was the face of the goddess who had taken his ancestral hand and spared him the pain of death. It was a face shaped by matrilineal genetic codes which had not changed significantly in forty millennia. When she opened her eyes he would look into the solemn grey of her father and not the liquid dark eyes of her mother. But that was the only change and it was a change which signified a new direction.

This child was almost pure. A true lineal descendant of the Others. The Lordly Ones. Until now her ancestors had never accepted anything from their fathers. But this one had. Which meant that her father must also be exceptional. Caroline, Lucy, Amethyst, Hilary, all of them except Imogen's mother Sophie, were only partially complete. They were like him, hybrids. Partly human, but also in different measures part of whatever the Lordly Ones had once been, passed on through the matrilineal DNA of those altered Neanderthal women and absorbed into the warp and weft of human evolution through rape and slavery. But this one's DNA had never changed, because she had never allowed it to change. And now, millennia later she was the product of a union between another pure female, and the equally pure Marcus Scott, reuniting a genetic pathway which had been lost for millennia. This one could have extraordinary powers. And so could her brother.

Her brother. And then he remembered Nikos' wife, Ayesha. Not for nothing was she called Ayesha. The immortal goddess of Rider Haggard's famous novel. Like Imogen, but more so. Even closer to that matrilineal ancestry. The child of the mute clairvoyant Yasmine Allam and his own distant relative, Drew Quatermain. Pure as the finest diamond. Ayesha would never die. But she could be killed, as her husband, Imogen's twin, Nikos had been killed. They had failed to save

him. But Ayesha was alive. Somewhere. How was it possible? Not one of the distant descendants of the Lordly Ones but six, counting the two men, Marcus Scott and Drew Quatermain, who must also share that same unique DNA. Could eternity really shake the genetic dice and throw together six creatures, whose origins lay in an inexplicable and remote past, with the blind intention of recreating a lost species of humanity? Or was Caroline telling the truth. Was there really an intelligence guiding this? An intelligence beyond comprehension? An intelligence forged from the sum of the memories of all of those dead lives? Intervening now in the genetic future of humanity? Or not humanity. Something else.

"Caroline never lies. None of us lie. We can't lie. Not proper lies. Just as we can't kill. Why are you thinking about these things?"

The great grey gorgeous eyes opened slowly and looked into Mike's eyes.

"Because I want to know the truth."

"The truth is that we are different. That's all. Not better or worse. Just different."

"I want to know about the past. About where we came from. About why our two species had such a special relationship."

"I know nothing of this. I have never been there. I have never been further back than that dream my mother had of the woman of Weshesh. The Trojan Greek woman who was my ancestor; being raped by an ancient Egyptian. The moment at which she became truly aware of what she was. You've read the book. You know what I mean."

"I've read the book. But I didn't believe it."

"Do you believe it now?"

Mike nodded.

"You realise," Imogen whispered, pulling his face down towards her breasts, "you realise that we've been talking with our minds. You have unlocked your telepathy. You are certainly one of us."

Once again, for no apparent reason, Mike started to cry.

"You are like us. We cry for no reason. My mother cries. She's a strong person, and able, and confident, but she cries. It's as though all the pain of time suddenly weighs on us. We wonder who we are and we cannot grasp the truth. We cry for what we lost, so long ago. And for all of us who died horrible deaths because humans thought they were witches, or worse." "There, there, cry on my breasts and I will cry with you. You are no longer the person you thought you were."

Mike allowed the tears to flow and buried his sobbing face in her infinitely comforting body. All his life he had avoided the involvement that comes with love. Now, for the first time, the infinite tenderness of

love breathed life into his iron heart, and the irony of it was, he thought, the irony was that this woman, who he loved beyond reason, could never be his alone, never belong to him alone, because the love that radiated from her soul was unconditional love for all of her kind.

"You must not be jealous," Imogen whispered, gently stroking his hair, "jealousy is our greatest enemy. It is the curse of humans. It poisons their entire lives. Jealousy, greed, envy. The source of all evil. We share everything. Everything. I will love you. But I also love Lucy, and John Pendle, and any one else who is like us. We give our bodies freely as an act of love and friendship. You must accept it. It is love that binds us together, not sex. John must also learn to accept it. It is the way we are. The way we have always been. For sex for pleasure we can be with any of our kind. But for sex for companionship we go in threes. Always in threes. Two female and one male. Lucy can tell you why. Three is a prime number. You must accept that I am already in a triad. I am with Lucy and John Pendle, just as Lucy's mother is with Sophie and Marcus, and Yesha and Nikos with Amethyst. I will sleep with you whenever you need me, until such time as you find your own triad, and even after that, for pleasure, if we want to. We all adore sex. We are obsessed with it. But none of us belongs to each other. Not because we are separate entities, like humans, but because we are one entity in separate bodies. When we make love to each other our consciousness merges and sometimes we can feel the *ekstasis*, the release of our souls to that universal consciousness to which we all belong. We felt it just now. And when that happens it is sublime."

"I thought you weren't supposed to know," Mike said quietly, "according to *Scholars and Gentlemen*."

"Our parents thought they could keep us out of their minds. They were mistaken. But we never let them know what we know. Or what we are. We are much stronger than them. They have no idea what we could do, if we tried. And they've developed methods to keep us out which actually help us. It's almost as though there is some kind of evolutionary struggle going on to force us to develop our paranormal powers. I try not to think about it. I can cope with telepathy. But it is awesome to think that we may never die."

"Do you believe that?"

"Uncle Drew explained it to me and to Lucy. And he wanted me to explain it to you, once you had read the book. Our parents are not ageing. And we can consciously change our bodies, to a small extent. Sophie taught us how to do that. We just do silly girly things with it, because we're frightened to do anything else. But when we were children....then....but none of us can remember. Only Nikos used to do

some interesting things with his bits. But, unconsciously, who knows what our bodies are doing. And who knows what we are capable of when we are really challenged. Remember the Square of Three. The men who were torturing Nikos and Yesha. We knocked them out. In the end we couldn't kill them ourselves. We were going to let you kill them. But something stopped us. Then Lucy got frightened and Caroline came up with an alternative."

Mike rolled himself off Imogen's breasts and sat up.

"What about Nikos and Ayesha?"

Imogen nodded and started to cry.

"Alive. But poor Nikos has been horribly burned. My poor brother," she wept, "he is dying."

"Wait a minute," Mike's analytical mind reminded itself of his half forgotten mission, "How do you know they're alive?"

Imogen continued to cry, "because we would have felt it if they had died. The soul cries out to us. And anyway Uncle Drew told us. Yesha is okay. But Nikos is in a coma. I can't connect to him. His mind is blank. His consciousness is somewhere else."

"How were they found?"

"Yesha had a phone but it wasn't a tracker and it didn't get switched on until it was almost too late. It took too long for Uncle Drew's people to home in on the exact location. We got there first, or Lucy did, somehow. I think she teleported. Somehow. None of us has ever done that. But Lucy....Lucy understand....the maths. Then we disabled the torturers and Lucy somehow released Yesha and Nikos, she doesn't know how. But then they lost consciousness. Then the Trikos security people arrived with the police. They were very close and got there very quickly, but too late to save Nikos from being badly burned. Poor Nikos. He may never make love again. Poor Yesha. Poor Sophie and Marcus. Their poor son. My poor brother. You know, they were lying in the garden in each other's arms, where Lucy left them."

"And the men? The men who were torturing Nikos and Yesha?"

"They are alive. I think."

"And what was Caroline's alternative to death?"

"We did something to their brains. We gave them a gift. We gave them the gift of truth. Now they cannot lie. That was Caroline's alternative."

"And where are they? The men?"

Imogen shrugged and made a little moue. "The police have them. They'll be charged, I suppose."

Mike lay back on his pillow and put his hands behind his head.

"So that's why none of you have been noticeably upset. Jesus," Mike

pulled a face, “why are you telling me this? Why didn’t Drew Quatermain tell me when he was here?”

“Because he wanted to be sure that you were one of us and that meant one of us had to make love to you. Caroline and Lucy are too quick to be swayed by reason. Love is the only certain test. And he wanted you to be fully unlocked, so that we can find out exactly what your powers are.”

“And now you’re sure?”

“Yes, you are able to love me. If you can love me you can love all of us, and if you love us we can trust you. We need you Mike. We need your strength. You have enormous strength. You are one of us. But you are subtly different and we don’t know how you are different. We need to find out. Sooner or later you will have to make love to Lucy.”

“It was you, wasn’t it. In my dream. It was you who brought the animal to be killed. Not Lucy. You put its mind to sleep, and I killed its body.”

Imogen sat up and looked at him intently, “you have these dreams too?”

“Only twice, when I was with Caroline. Not with you. With you it was different.”

“Ah, there will be more of them. Our past lives roam around in our subconscious. It can be a pain sometimes. But it wasn’t me. It must have been Lucy. I could never kill anything. Even by proxy.”

Mike looked around Imogen’s cluttered room. Imogen was not a tidy person. Clothes, boxes, shoes, hats, bras, knickers, books, magazines, hair brushes, bric a brac of one kind or another littered the floor. The wood panelled walls were decorated with posters, mostly of films and film stars. It was a lively imitation of chaos, but Mike suspected that if Imogen wanted to find something she would know exactly where it was. He had been wrong about Imogen. Wrong to think that she was just sex incarnate. This young woman was highly intelligent and very well educated. Sexy, and smart with it. Maybe more than a match for her ascetic and intellectual half sister.

“Mum thinks I’m messy,” Imogen said, in reply to his unvoiced thoughts, “she’s very tidy. My grandfather was a sailor and taught her to travel light and put things away. I’ve never really been able to do that.”

Mike relaxed back onto the bed and looked at the ceiling. It was decorated with patterns of symmetrical triangles bounded by plaster moulded to look like twisted rope. At the intersecting corners of each triangle were little plaster rosettes. Triangles again. Everything revolved round threes.

"Do you love John Pendle?" he asked, without quite knowing why.

Imogen pulled a face and said nothing. Mike drew his own inference. Imogen was with Pendle because Lucy had chosen to be with Pendle.

"It's not something to worry about," said Imogen, reading his mind, "I shall be like Caroline who loves Sophie and shares Marcus with her. But she also went with Drew, and any one else she fancied. We're like that. I shall always be free to sleep with you. If you want me to. But now, I think we should get up and go for a walk. Before it gets dark."

"Wait a minute," said Mike, thoughtfully, "you don't approve of John Pendle do you. You think Lucy should have gone with me. Am I right?"

"I think," Imogen chose her words carefully, "that John Pendle is a fine person. And he is one of us. Therefore I love him. But there are many men like him, sensitive to the cosmic consciousness, poets and musicians, physicists, and physicians, mathematicians, scholars, artists, creative souls of all kinds. That was our genetic gift to humans. Their genetic gift to us was death. By allowing ourselves to breed with them we lost our immortality. But John Pendle doesn't have your strength. He's like James Sinclair, a creative mind with an insight into the sublime, but you are like my father and Drew Quatermain. You have enormous psychic energy which empowers all of us. John doesn't have that. I think that we have a duty to breed with the strongest of our kind. Lucy has allowed her reason to override her heart. John Pendle is not the best breeding stock." Imogen's words were less well chosen than they might have been.

"You sound like a bloodstock dealer," Mike said angrily, "is that all I am. Breeding stock?"

"Men like you are very rare. And you are even more rare because you are not quite the same as us genetically. We need your strength and we need your genetic variance. You understand." Mike felt the desperate emphasis in her voice.

"Jesus Christ," Mike muttered, "is that to be my future with your people. A fucking super stud?"

"Is that such a bad thing?" Imogen started to cry again, "I didn't mean to insult you. Forgive me. My parents made a mistake because they didn't understand what was expected of them. In their youth, when they were our age, they were unbelievably promiscuous. But then they fell in love with each other and are happy with each other. And the promiscuity mostly stopped. And they had children. Us."

"So, what are you getting at? I'm sure you can have children by anyone you like. You are all extremely promiscuous."

"I don't think so," Imogen's voice had fallen to a whisper, "Yesha's mum died in childbirth. Caroline had only one child, though she

conceived twins. Sophie was the only one who actually had twins. And in all the years since we were born neither Sophie nor Caroline have conceived again, though they have always been sexually active with both Marcus and Drew, until Drew remarried, and I know that my mum desperately wanted more children. Caroline, less so. I don't think we can have lots of children. I think we can breed only once in our endless lifetimes, and never more than twins and nearly always female. If they survive. That's why Nikos is so important to us." Imogen was sobbing, "I think that's why our species nearly died out in the first place. Because there were too few men with the power to sustain our genetic legacy. And now we're doing the same thing again because, in spite of what they say, Marcus and Drew reined in their promiscuity because they are so in love with our mothers. It's ironic; we live for love and love is our life, yet too much love may be our nemesis. Your inability to truly love may be the key to our survival because you can go forth and multiply without ever becoming too attached to any of us. Ironic. The human part of me wants you for myself. The other part knows that it must share you with the rest of our world."

Imogen collapsed sobbing onto Mike's chest. He held her tight. "Is there any reason why you can't have my children? Is there some law that says you have to be in a threesome?" he asked.

"No," said Imogen tearfully, "it's not that. It's Lucy's children I'm worried about. Lucy should not have children by John Pendle. He's nice, but he doesn't have anything to contribute genetically. She should have your children. Because.... well, you know why. And so should I. And if Nikos can't give Yesha children, then there's no male left who is equal to us. Except you. Our fathers can't have children by their children. That would be genetic folly. And we can't love humans because we would always outlive them and the pain of their deaths would be unbearable to us. We can only truly love our own kind."

Mike shook his head in despair. Rationally he knew that Imogen was right, always assuming their presumption that they were a divergent species was correct, but none of it made sense. Even if the older women were no longer fertile, in the short term there was no scientific reason why Marcus Scott should not father children by Yesha, or Drew Quatermain by Imogen and Lucy. But the longer term consequences might be disastrous.

"According to *Scholars and Gentlemen* Drew Quatermain thought that one third of all women could have the combined telepathy and longevity genes. That could be more than a billion women throughout the world. I don't think that even I could cope with that," Mike said ruefully.

Imogen started to laugh, tears suddenly forgotten. "You could have

a go,” she giggled, “but actually it’s far fewer. Those who belong to our genetic family and have retained significant telepathic and longevity genes are probably around forty thousand. Still a lot, but only a small proportion of them are of childbearing age. Maybe ten thousand. And most of them now work for the Trikos Group. That’s three a day, let’s say, for ten years, with occasional days off to screw me. You could cope with that, Casanova. And, since it’s now too late to go for a walk, you can make a start by coping with me.”

CHAPTER 17

Wayne Kraitmann, he of the extra large dick, sat quietly in the police interview room and tried to figure out what the hell he was doing there. The last thing he remembered was waving a blowtorch at the dude's pecker. Then there had been a swarm of white lights blazing inside his brain and he had passed out. Later, much later, he had woken up in a police cell and now he was being interviewed by a polite limey cop who wanted to know his name.

"Call me Wayne," he said.

"Your surname?" the officer asked.

"My surname?" Wayne rummaged around in his memory for his surname, "Yeah, Kraitmann. Wayne Kraitmann."

"Wayne Kraitmann?"

"Yeah. That's right."

The polite policeman made a careful note at the top of a form. "And your home address?"

Kraitmann struggled again to remember where he came from. Eventually it came to him. "Yeah, 24A Hunniset Grove, Ingleside, San Francisco. Yeah. Jeez I've got a headache," he muttered. His brain felt as though it had been pummelled by Mike Tyson then crushed into a matchbox.

"I meant your address in England," the polite policeman continued. Kraitmann focussed on him. He was in his forties. Short, with a round face and soft black hair shaved to the contours of his scalp so that it looked like a medieval skull cap. He was dressed in a cheap dark suit, with a tie and a clean blue shirt.

"Oh," said Kraitmann, "England. Jeez. I dunno. Somewhere in London. I guess. I can't remember. Near some place. Aston? Acton. I dunno. I just got off the subway and walked. I know how to get there. I don't remember the address."

"That's not good enough," the policeman replied. Kraitmann shrugged.

"Tough," he said.

"Do you have legal representation?" the policeman asked, moving to another section of his form.

"Why?"

"Well," the policeman continued calmly, "you were arrested in the commission of a very serious offence. You will need a good lawyer."

"Fuck that," Kraitmann replied, "I wanna speak to the embassy."

"Yes," the policeman replied with studied calmness, "in time."

“What fucking offence?” Kraitmann demanded, “I’ve only been here three days.”

The policeman lounged back in his chair and looked quizzically at Kraitmann. The American was in his early twenties. Poker faced with a reddish complexion and a fashionable spiky hair cut dyed blonde and held in place with gel. He was very fit, very fit indeed. Inspector David Grainger did not fancy his chances if this fellah got violent. For that reason there were two large uniformed constables in the interview room, as well as Grainger’s bag man who also knew how to handle himself.

Grainger picked up another form. “You are charged,” he said, “with kidnapping, rape, murder, assault with felonious intent, unauthorised possession of firearms. You name it. You did it.”

“What are you fucking talking about, “ Kraitmann exclaimed, “who am I suppose to have kidnapped?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I fucking don’t know.” Little shards of light suddenly lit up in the deepest recesses of Kraitmann’s memory. “Oh, you mean them? The packages.”

“I mean the daughter and son in law of Drew Quatermain. One of the richest men in the world.”

“Oh,” Kraitmann repeated, “them. Yeah. Well, yeah. Sure, we kidnapped them. But we were only acting under orders. There is a war on you know.”

“What do you mean, acting under orders. You soldiers or something.”

“Soldiers?” Kraitmann replied, “Sure, I was a soldier. Now I work for the CIA. I’m with the good guys.”

“I hardly think that raping and torturing an innocent young women and her husband counts as being one of the good guys.”

“Yeah, yeah, but we have to obey orders.”

“And who gave you these orders? Tell the truth.” Grainger did not believe that Kraitmann worked for the CIA. It was inconceivable that the CIA would snatch the daughter of a leading industrialist and try to hold him to ransom by torturing her. Kraitmann was lying through his teeth.

Kraitmann struggled with the irritating little flashes of brilliant light which persistently blocked the synaptic pathways which connected his brain to his elusive counter interrogation training.

“Lange,” he said eventually, “Ormen Lange.”

“And where would we find him?”

“Langley, I suppose.”

“And of course,” Grainger said sarcastically, “you have his phone number. Mr Lange at Langley.”

“Yeah, sure I have it. But we mostly use the secure socket on the

Langley web site. I'm supposed to report in. If I don't report in you're going to be in deep shit. You don't mess with these dudes."

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me his phone number. Write it down for me, so we can ring him and corroborate your story." He pushed a notepad and pen across the desk to the American. Kraitmann looked at it blankly.

"Go ahead. Write it down."

Kraitmann struggled with the pen and eventually committed a complex sequence of numbers to paper. It was getting stuffy in the interview room and his headache was getting worse. Grainger tore off the note and handed it to his bag man who left the room.

"What was the purpose of this kidnapping," Grainger continued, "money?"

"I don't know. We don't get told fucking purposes. I had my orders. That's all."

Okay then, let's approach this from another angle. What were your orders?"

"Yeah, okay, sweet. Our orders." Kraitmann thought for a few minutes, "Yeah. The packages were delivered to us by another group. Limeys dressed up as cops. Our orders were to humiliate them and video them being humiliated. Then fucking stress them so they did their psi power thing. We were like free to do what we wanted with them. Sweet."

"Psi power?"

"Yeah, yeah. These guys are supposed to be telepaths or something. If they get stressed they can kill people by thinking at them. Real cool weapon that. Zap, you're dead."

Grainger stared at the ceiling in disbelief. This creature was off its trolley.

"Why the video?"

"Dunno. Lange wanted it all videoed, is all. We were supposed to do Gonzo on the broad and torture the dude."

"Gonzo?" Grainger was unfamiliar with this word.

"Yeah, yeah, Gonzo. Gonzo sex. You know, violent sex. Knock her about. Screw her, oral her, shoot off in her face, anal. Humiliate her. That kind of thing."

"But why video it? We have the video. You and your associates are all there doing it. You aren't even wearing masks. You're bang to rights. It's not me that's in deep shit. It's you. And you were torturing the boy. With a blowlamp. Why? Why would anyone in the CIA order you to do that."

"Dunno. Just orders. Leverage, we were told. To put pressure on the

father. And we don't need masks. The tech guys fuzz out our faces when they edit the stuff."

"But they could see you."

"They?"

"Your packages. Mr and Mrs Scott."

"Oh well. Yeah. Not a problem."

The bag man came back into the room and whispered in Grainger's ear. Grainger stood up and left the room with the bag man. A few minutes later they returned.

"Well," said Grainger, smiling affably at Kraitmann, "it appears there is no Ormen Lange in the CIA."

"Well, there wouldn't be, would there," Kraitmann said, "it's all need to know. And deniability. They ain't going to give anything away. Try the website."

"How do we get to it?"

"You'll need my username and pin," Kraitmann added.

"Write it down."

Kraitmann scribbled out another long sequence of digits and letters.

Grainger watched in disbelief. He was now totally convinced that Kraitmann was a fraud. No trained CIA agent would spill all the beans without someone else stamping forcefully on the can. Grainger had not needed to provide even a hint of a blowlamp to apply pressure to Kraitmann. It had all come tumbling out and none of it could possibly be true. The rest of the surviving members of his group had come up with pretty much the same story, but Kraitmann appeared to be the leader and he alone appeared to know who he claimed to be working for. The other three were just goons. Grainger did not expect to find anything on the website. It could wait.

"Okay," he said, looking reassuringly at Kraitmann, "suppose I accept your story as true. Why were you torturing the boy?"

"Well, see. This is like hard to believe," once again Kraitmann struggled with his memory. "See, these packages are supposed to be telepathic and like they can move things with their minds. But they need to be provoked. So the idea was to torture the boy and see if the girl would like help him. Using her psychic powers."

"You expect me to believe this crap," Grainger said.

Kraitmann looked nonplussed. "It's the fucking truth," he said, "I swear to God. It's the truth."

Grainger turned despairingly to his bag man, grimaced, and then turned back Kraitmann. "And another thing, Mr Kraitmann. Who was the dead man?"

"Oh him. He was a medic. He worked for someone else. He was

trying to stop us completing our mission. We were having a real good time. I had to whack him.”

“So you admit killing this man?”

“Yeah. Sure. He was a threat to the mission.”

“And what were you going to do with the ‘packages’, as you called them, when you got what you wanted. Given that they would have no difficulty recognising you in court.”

Kraitmann looked embarrassed. “Like I said. No problemo. We were authorised to take executive action.”

“Executive action?” Grainger raised his eyebrows, “meaning?”

“We could like wipe them.”

“You mean kill them?”

“Yeah. Like that,” Kraitmann seemed puzzled that anyone could ask such a stupid question.

“Yes,” Grainger had had enough, for the time being, “I thought so. One last thing. When the police were called to the house by Drew Quatermain’s security people you and your associates were unconscious. Why was that?”

“Dunno. One minute I was doing a number on the guy. Next I’m in a police cell. Drew Quatermain’s security people? They found us? Shit. The phone that fucking bitch had up her fucking cunt. Shit. That’s how they found us. I guess they must have hit us with some kind of anaesthetic gas grenade. We have this stuff. And it works man. It sure works.”

“There’s no evidence of that. Quatermain’s people say that when they arrived you were already unconscious. And your ‘packages’ were out in the back garden lying in each other’s arms. Somehow they had got themselves free. How do you explain that?”

“Dunno. I was like unconscious. But the packages were in restraint, last thing I remember. Handcuffed to the fucking chairs. No way could they have got free. Though.....,” Kraitmann struggled with an elusive memory which danced at the edge of recollection but eventually eluded him. He shrugged, “maybe Anstruther sent backup for the medic. Maybe the backup hit us when he found we’d killed the medic. I dunno”

“Anstruther? Who is Anstruther?”

“Some Air Force guy. Supposed to be on Lange ’s team. But I guess he had his own agenda.”

“Okay,” Grainger looked at his watch, “we’ll suspend this interview for the time being. Recorder off. Please.” He stood up. “Take him back to the cells.”

The two constables eased Kraitmann out of his chair.

“Oh,” said Grainger, almost as an afterthought, “you haven’t seen the

news have you.” He took a newspaper out of his briefcase and handed it to Kraitmann. The whole of the front page was take up with an aerial photograph of what had once been the financial district Manhattan, framed by a semi circle of flame extending from the waterfront. A large chunk of New York no longer existed. Kraitmann’s jaw dropped.

In the privacy of his own office Dave Grainger fired up his computer and went to the CIA web address given to him by Wayne Kraitmann. The address was not the normal CIA public access web site and consisted of little more than a secure login form. Dave indolently tapped in the user name and pin kindly donated by his cooperative detainee. To his intense surprise and considerable embarrassment the login was accepted and he found himself looking at Wayne Kraitmann’s standard communication and report page, complete with 256k encryption protocols. Wayne Kraitmann was telling the truth. Carillons of alarm bells rang in Dave Grainger brain. He rapidly logged out and called his opposite number in Special Branch.

The phone call and momentary computer contact also rang alarm bells in Langley, but they were initially ignored because larger and more pressing alarms were focussing all minds on the threat of another terrorist nuclear strike. Once that imperative had moved down the scale of intelligence priorities a CIA analyst picked up the flagged access to Kraitmann’s encrypted e-mail and passed the information on to Kraitmann’s controllers.

“What the fuck is going on here!” Ormen Lange yelled at the messenger, “Why is the report blank? He should have reported by now.”

The woman clerk winced and looked confused. It was not her job to figure out why stuff happened. She just shuffled stuff along until it reached someone who knew what it meant.

“Have you back tracked on this,” Greg Barbas enquired, more gently, “do we know where he called in from?”

“There’s an IP trace on the computer,” the woman replied tentatively, “and the phone call was logged. The Brit police wanted to speak to you.”

“And?”

“Standard denial. But bothtraced back to a police station in some place called,” she hesitated, “Shroosbury? England?”

“Was there nothing on the report?” Lange asked.

“No. He logged in and logged straight out again. No entries at all.”

Barbas looked at Lange and then back at the woman clerk. He gestured to her to leave.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Lange said.

"Anstruther's source said they were dead," Barbas said.

"Possibly not. We know the police took bodies away. But we only assumed they were dead. Maybe not. Maybe that's what they wanted us to think. Obviously the cops have them," Lange grimaced. The last thing he wanted was Special Ops people in the hands of the British police. "They wouldn't talk though. These guys are tough as hell. And anyway those pussyfooting Brits don't use aggressive interview techniques. It has to be Kraitmann's gotten to a computer somehow and just had time to logon and logoff. He's smart. He's figured we can find him from the IP address."

"Do we get them out? It won't be easy. The Brits get pissed when they find we've fucked with them. And what if they have the video cards?" Barbas replied.

"They'll sure as hell be pissed and if they have the video we'll be seriously fucked. It's critical that the Brits don't find out that Kraitmann is working for us. It's too risky to try to wipe them in the UK. We have to get them back. And in any case we're tied up investigating this nuke at least until Christmas, and probably beyond. But I'm not giving up on Quatermain. And I don't want to hear anymore about Wayne Kraitmann. He fucked up. And there's a price for fucking up. So this is what we do."

"Fake website?" Dave Grainger said incredulously. John Sheridan ignored the no smoking sign on Grainger's door, lit a cheroot and looked at the ceiling.

"Seems so," he said, "my contact in the CIA had it checked out. Apparently some American university students have been trying to incorporate the CIA into an online virtual reality game. Second Life, I think it's called. You can create an avatar for yourself and inhabit a cyberspace world where you can be anything you like, including being a virtual CIA agent fighting virtual terrorists. I've had a look at it. It's certainly there. They've even got a virtual mock up of Langley. Maybe your prisoner knew about this and used it to distract you."

Grainger pulled a face. "Avatar," he said, "what's an avatar."

"A virtual identity in cyberspace. You can create any *persona* you fancy. It's all completely anonymous. They just used it as a cover for a straightforward ransom kidnapping. That's all."

"Well," Grainger said regretfully, "it still doesn't solve my problem. I've got four homicidal Americans who insist they are CIA agents,

caught red handed in the commission of horrendous crimes. What am I supposed to do?"

Sheridan thought for a while. "Think about it," he said eventually, "do you seriously believe that an undercover agent would openly admit to working for the CIA without being subject to extreme duress, especially in a potentially high profile case like this? Think what would happen if this ever got out to the press. There would be hell to pay. Anyway, they weren't actually caught red handed, were they. You arrived after Drew Quatermain's security people. How do you know they didn't plant them there?"

"Why would they do that?" Grainger said defensively, "Quatermain was beside himself. Both his daughter and son in law were unconscious. The son in law had his prick burned off and is unlikely to survive. The girl was bleeding from her bum and vagina and was in catatonic shock. I've never seen anything like it. I don't see why Quatermain would try to fake anything. He was as anxious as us to catch the villains. And he cooperated with us all along the line."

"Quatermain was always two steps ahead of you. And don't you think it very strange that these villains were all out cold, with no obvious explanation as to who put them out. Four tough young men do not just simultaneously pass out. Something happened to them."

"Kraitmann thinks he was gassed," Dave replied, "but there was no evidence of that. We've rerun the forensics and had additional pathology tests. There's no evidence of any known tactical anaesthetic in their blood. There was a used stun grenade. But that's just a mega flash bang. No gas."

Sheridan folded his arms and lounged back in the chair. Dave Grainger was not quite sure what to make of this louche young man with his Hugh Grant face and Oxbridge accent. It said Special Branch on his warrant card. But it could just as easily have said MI5.

"Could be Mafia, I suppose," Sheridan continued, "apparently one of Quatermain's companies is behind this anti narcotic drug treatment. It seems to have been a great success. The narcotics industry has taken a major hit. Dealers have disappeared off the streets. Pity really. I quite enjoyed the occasional spliff. Doesn't have any effect on me now. Bit of a cheek turning us all off without asking our consent. Wonder how he did it."

Dave grunted. Druggies always disgusted him, especially yuppy druggies, but he had to agree that whatever Drew Quatermain's company had done it had been a great success, even if it did pose an insoluble ethical dilemma. Drug use had dwindled to nothing. "Kraitmann just said he was one of the good guys," he muttered.

"Being a good guy is largely a matter of point of view," said Sheridan, stubbing out the cheroot in an unused ashtray, "I'm sure that there are plenty of arabs who think the people who let off the nuke in New York are good guys."

"Yes," said Dave sadly, "so good they'll go straight to Paradise and collect their forty one virgins."

"Very likely," John Sheridan replied, "anyway, whatever. I'm authorised to take this off your hands. This is strictly Special Branch Business. These people are on an American terrorist wanted list because of the attempt to hack into the CIA. The Americans want to talk to them. So...if you'd like to sort out the paperwork I'll arrange to have them picked up and moved to London. We'll take it from there."

"I'm not happy about this, you know," Dave Grainger objected, "they have committed serious offences in this county."

"But difficult to prove. Unless you can find out who made them unconscious."

"For God's sake, Kraitmann admitted it. He said they were under orders."

"Nothing I can do, old chap. My hands are tied. The Americans want them back. There's a rendition order on them."

Sheridan stood up. His interview with this provincial policeman was at an end. He too had his orders.

"Oh, by the way," Sheridan added, "they'd like the video memory cards as well."

Dave Grainger scratched his skull capped scalp, then looked quizzically at Sheridan, "how did you know about the video cards?" he asked.

Sheridan scowled at him, "don't get clever," he said in a voice loaded with menace, "give me the cards please."

Grainger shrugged and agreed. Better a quiet life.

One week later Wayne Kraitmann and his associates walked across the tarmac apron at RAF Lakenheath, home of the USAF 48th Tactical Fighter Wing. At the edge of the apron was a small Raytheon executive jet.

"Friggin marvellous," Wayne exclaimed to his colleagues, "first class to home. I told you they'd extract us. They always do. Fucking limeys. Fuck them."

The four men climbed the short boarding ladder and made themselves comfortable in the luxurious seats. Once the Raytheon was airborne a uniformed stewardess dispensed drinks from the cocktail cabinet.

"Nice tits," he said peering into the ample cleavage revealed as the girl bent over him with the tray.

"Why thank you sir," she said with a smiling Southern voice.

"Fancy a gang bang later?" Wayne smirked. The girl's smile froze.

"No thank you sir," she replied icily, her mind recoiling in horror from the images from his deranged consciousness which rampaged through her telepathic blocks.

"Suit yourself. You'll be missing the biggest dicks you're ever likely to see." He lounged back in the seat, ogling the tight skirted ass retreating down the short aisle. "Friggin, fucking marvellous," Wayne knocked back a stiff Scotch and held up his glass for more. "Ain't what it used to be," he said, "don't seem to get smashed any more."

But after two or three drinks he and his friends were sufficiently mellow to start reminiscing about past missions and who had raped the most women. Many more drinks followed and the tortures, rapes and murders became more and more graphic, each voluble account accompanied by raucous laughter as the men attempted to outdo each other in depravity as drunkenness eluded them. The stewardess, sitting quietly on her own in a seat at the front of the aircraft, heard it all and felt for herself all the pain and degradation of her kind. She began to cry, not so loud that anyone could hear, but the tears trickled down her cheeks and her face crunched up with terror and despair.

There were two other passengers on the plane. Impassive middle aged men in anonymous dark suits sitting silently at the back, behind Kraitmann and his soldiers. Hearing everything. Seeing everything. Doing nothing.

When the plane landed at an anonymous CIA airfield Kraitmann and his friends were woken by their minders, bundled into the mandatory black windowed Chrysler Voyager and driven to an underground debriefing centre in the middle of nowhere. The stewardess stood in the doorway of the executive jet and watched the car pull away. She wiped the tears from her eyes and tried to rid her mind of the appalling images which had flowed into it when she had made that first tentative intrusion into the malign consciousness of these depraved men. The training she had received at Trikos Security had not prepared her for this. The minds she had shared there had been full of love and optimism. The evil she had seen here was beyond belief. But that was the trouble with evil. It was beyond belief. Beyond belief that rational creatures could behave with such depravity; worse than any animals, for animals rarely kill for pleasure.

She wondered sometimes whether she had been wise to respond to the letter inviting her to have her DNA tested. Or wise to join this

subtle community of souls who could read each other's minds and found extraordinary spiritual insight in the sharing of each other's bodies. She had not, until now, perceived it as dangerous, even though the psychics who had trained her had warned her to keep her skills concealed and shown her how to selectively suppress the telepathic babel which surrounded her. There were many more like her, far more than anyone had realised, and mostly women. And, as Drew Quatermain's subtle computers covertly scanned proliferating government databases for their unique genetic fingerprints, more potential psychics were identified and invited to work for Trikos, either directly, or indirectly, then quietly moved into positions where they could help each other. There was no cause, no movement, no creed, no agenda, no ultimate plan other than commitment to the unconditional love of friends, the care of the sick and needy, and the Darwinian imperative of survival in a hostile world. Her own psychic skills were modest, hardly more than the capacity for empathy shared by many women. She could listen to the thoughts of others, and transmit her own thoughts over short distances, or if she was in physical contact with another who shared her skills. So far she had found only women who shared her abilities. Men with these skills were incredibly rare, though there were some men, gentle men, who had a simple empathy into which her consciousness could enter. So she shared her body and her soul with them, and with the women who were like her. And she passed on to them the modified genes which had been gifted to her but never fully unlocked because she had never met a man or woman who had the psychic strength to unlock them.

After it was refuelled the jet took off and returned to its base. When she got home she rang her Trikos contact and reported what had happened.

"So," said Lange , "you fucked up. Why?"

Wayne Kraitmann wriggled in his seat. "I don't friggin know," he muttered.

"You were torturing them," Barbas said.

"Yeah," Wayne nodded, "sure, that's what you told us to do."

"We didn't tell you to kill them," Lange snarled, his gaunt granite face twisted into a sardonic sneer, "we needed them alive."

"Stuff happens," Kraitmann replied, "life is full of shit."

"Well your life certainly is, and it's about to get fuller. Why did you fall over yourself to tell the Brits who you were?"

"I dunno. They asked questions."

"You didn't have to tell them anything. You even gave them my name and a secret CIA web address. What got into your fucking head?"

Kraitmann shrugged.

"I dunno. I thought it better to tell the truth. It seemed like a good idea, at the time."

"You're a fucking lying bastard. You're trained to lie. Why would you tell the truth? Who are you really working for?"

"I work for you," Kraitmann was beginning to get alarmed. These were dangerous dudes. His alarm was entirely justified. One of the two heavies who had been with him in the plane hit him in the stomach, knocking the breath out of him. When he got his breath back he found that his wrists and ankles had been shackled to the chair.

"This isn't fucking necessary," he gasped, "I told you. I work for you."

Another blow, this time to the face. Kraitmann yelled out. This had not been in his job description. He was the one who doled out the pain. He spat out a broken tooth and tasted the blood trickling out of his mouth.

"Are you going to fucking well tell us? Or do you want us to get the blowtorch? What happened in that goddam house?" Barbas looked at Lange and then back to Kraitmann, "what did you do to them?"

"We did like you asked. We did the Gonzo and fucked her and all that and we videoed it. Like we was ordered to do."

"And where is the goddam video?" Barbas asked.

Kraitmann groaned as a gorilla fist slapped the side of his face. "Shit man. This isn't fucking necessary. I'm telling it like it was."

"Where is the video?" Barbas repeated his question.

"I dunno. The Brits must have it."

"There's no mention of it in the MI5 report," Lange said. He gestured to the gorilla to hit Kraitmann again, "and if they didn't find it Quatermain must have it."

Kraitmann groaned and spat out another tooth.

"Okay." Barbas resumed the interrogation, "so, what happened next?"

"She had a fucking cellphone up her cunt. Stupid bitch. It got stuck. We couldn't get it out. She was like screaming blue fucking murder. Then the medic came and got it out."

"Yeah," Barbas nodded and adjusted his cufflinks, "and who killed the medic and why?"

"I fucking killed him. He objected to what we were doing. He was working for Anstruther."

"That's certainly true," Lange agreed, "but was it necessary to kill him?"

"We were high on it man. Remember how the fucking adrenalin pounds when you're beating the fuck out of someone. Who needs drugs.

You can get like super high on violence. We were having a great time. He was like gonna spoil the fun.” Another fist pounded into his face, cutting open his eyebrow. Blood trickled into his eyes blinding him. The voices of the inquisitors merged into one demonic drone.

“So, you shot him.”

“Yeah, I fucking said so.”

“And then?”

“We got his notes. We tried to like get them to do their psychic thing. We shot her full of heroin.”

Barbas’s mental ears pricked up, “did you get a result?”

“No, she just went dozy. Nothing. So we like strangled the dude a bit to wind her up. Still nothing. So we got the blowtorch and roasted his nuts. That’s the last thing I remember.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t fucking know. We like passed out. Like I told the Brits. One minute we were roasting this guy’s nuts. He was like burning and hollering. Then there was like this blinding fucking light. Next thing I was in a police cell. I sure as hell don’t know what happened.”

“Not good enough. Guys like you don’t pass out unless someone puts a bullet in you. You’re lying.” Lange said.

“Why did you kill them?” Barbas asked.

“We didn’t fucking kill them,” Kraitmann squealed, “I told the fucking Brits. They were both alive when we passed out. They were both fucking cuffed to the fucking chairs. Shit. They were alive. He was burning, but he was alive. And so was she.”

“According to Anstruther’s source there were seven bodies.”

“Yeah. And four of them are still alive. So what does that prove.”

“You’re lying Kraitmann. Who are you really working for?”

“I’m not fucking lying,” Kraitmann’s voice had degenerated into a desperate whine. He knew with absolute clarity what was going to happen to him next. He was about to be introduced to the blowtorch, “I’m working for you. Why don’t you fucking believe me.”

“Maybe you are,” Lange said. He gestured to the heavies to unlock Kraitmann and take him back to his cell.

“Dead end?” Barbas asked, drawing his finger across his throat.

“I don’t think so,” Lange murmured.

“Are you going to wipe them?”

“No,” Lange thought for a while, “no. I’d like to know what really happened in that house. He’s lying his head off but Mr Kraitmann still has his uses, and we have ways of ensuring his loyalty. He knows too much. We need a reliable soldier. Keep him sweet. And his buddies.”

“You don’t think maybe the psi thing worked?” Barbas speculated,

“somehow? Maybe Kraitmann did provoke them and they did their mojo thing on him and his goons. They just don’t remember. Maybe that’s how the fuckers hide themselves. They wipe our memories.”

“Maybe. I don’t want to believe it. But my religion tells me that the Devil never sleeps. Christ. Maybe I have to believe that it is possible. Maybe this is how he manifests himself in our world. Read your bible Greg. Read your bible. It’s all there.” Lange looked at the ceiling and thought about his own God. “Rationally,” he continued, “I would prefer to think that Quatermain’s security got there well before the police. Somehow they knocked out Kraitmann and his associates. Probably with a tactical anaesthetic. And they took the video gear. He’s probably telling the truth about that. But we also have Throckmorton’s last report. He talks about Quatermain as though he’s some kind of alien. And he corroborates the psychic phenomena. The telepathy and this ritual called the Square of Three which he says they used to release the packages. He also says it’s the women who are in charge. And, most important, Quatermain says that humanity is doomed. We may choose not to believe it. But the evidence is beginning to stack up. Drew Quatermain appears to have an agenda and we had better take it seriously. The question is, are we looking at a rational scientific phenomenon? Or something significantly paranormal?”

“Maybe Throckmorton’s been hexed too,” Barbas ventured, “if they really do have psi powers they could make people believe anything they want them to believe. Throckmorton may be working for them without knowing it.”

Lange nodded, “in which case the info we’re monitoring could be totally false. The company certainly believed in psi powers enough to fund a research unit. Just suppose these guys really do have psi powers. That would make them a real threat to humanity because we would never be able to trust them. They would be a superior species...a superior species.....or they could be witches and warlocks. Servants of Satan.” Lange’s voice trailed off. He sat silently, weighing up the implications of the improbable, then came to a decision. “Either way they’re a threat. Both to us personally and to the human race in general. They have to be wiped. Read your Bible, Greg. The Devil walks amongst us. These may be creatures of the Devil. We have a duty to God.”

“I agree,” Barbas said cautiously, unwilling to commit himself to irrational beliefs but anxious not to annoy his superior, “I think we do have to take this seriously, but you can scarcely go to Chimera and argue that we take out Quatermain because he’s a witch! They’ll laugh themselves silly.

"You mean warlock. No, Quatermain and his coven must be neutralised for a whole host of reasons. But you're right. We have to find a legitimate excuse to whack him and his buddies which will stand up to the bureaucracy. We're going to need boats to hit those underwater hotels. If there is a psi threat it could be dispersed. It may not be enough just to take out the head. That's going to be expensive. In order to get the resources we will have to concentrate on the genetic stuff because that's scientifically credible. The psi stuff is flaky and witches are off the wall. Nobody will buy that. Our safest bet is to paint Quatermain as Throckmorton describes him. An insane megalomaniac in possession of a devastating biogenetic WMD."

"Which he might sell to the towel heads. Be a stroke for us though, if we found the key to the psi thing as well as the genetic weapon," Barbas reverted to being the curious scientist.

"Sure. But Quatermain isn't going to give anything away without pressure and if he knows about us and he has the memory sticks and he goes to the press we're totally fucked. The bottom line is that Quatermain and all his works must cease to exist. And if we find ourselves in a tactical situation with Quatermain's people we should neutralise the women at the first sign of a psi problem. Just in case. That's why we will need Kraitmann. He's in as deep as us and he's a threat to us. But if we neutralise him and his buddies here someone will notice. If we can provoke the witches to using their Satanic powers to neutralise those goons in the field....we kill two birds with one stone. We get rid of Kraitman and we establish once and for all that there is a Devil and therefore there must be a God. And all those rationalist atheists are fucked!"

"We're pursuing this further?" Barbas asked, unnerved by Lange's patent insanity.

"Yes, you bet we are," Lange lit a cigarette and puffed at contemplatively, "once the dust has settled on the nuke. I want Quatermain and his associates dead. But I also want to know how he implements his infectious genetic engineering, and if his women really are witches with powers that can kill. I'd really like to know about that too. Because if they do have these powers they are abominations against God and we have a moral duty to go after them. Unless they agree to work for us, of course. Then we cut a deal."

"You seriously believe they may be....witches..warlocks?" Barbas asked, with all the sceptical incredulity of a committed scientist.

"Maybe. These creatures are not normal. Someone or something has put a spell on Kraitmann and possibly on Throckmorton. So we'd better believe it. Quatermain and his coven may well be a threat to both,"

Lange replied, “and even if they aren’t witches and warlocks, no one has the right to fucking well inoculate the world against sin. It’s fucking immoral and it flies in the face of God. Sin is essential to salvation. He’s going to pay for that. Ever spent Christmas in England?”

Barbas shook his head, “never been to England,” he said.

“51st state,” Lange said, “total fucking shit hole.”

CHAPTER 18

"I want you to meet someone," Imogen said, leading Mike Throckmorton by the hand to a cottage buried deep in the woods on the Croxton estate. The cottage was very ancient and in need of repair, shrouded in ancient yew trees and built of golden sandstone randomly punctuated by small casement windows. In front of the cottage was a large garden bounded by a low stone wall. The garden was functional rather than decorative, but at this fag end of the year in the month before Christmas there was little growing in it except for a few winter greens and Brussel sprouts.

Imogen lifted the ornate lion's head doorknocker and tapped once on the bright, white painted door. She was wearing jeans and long black boots, and a black parka like coat with a huge fur lined hood from which that bewitchingly beautiful face smiled a smile which would melt the hardest of hearts and thaw the most frozen of souls. Imogen was devastatingly beautiful. He had seen her naked, caressed and kissed every part of her divine body and entered it with the reverence of a postulant prostrate before a goddess. And yet it was still her face which fascinated and mystified him. Each nuance, every minute expression, the slightest flick of the dark eyebrows, the flash of the grey eyes, the finest crease in the dimpled cheek, the tiniest moue of the luscious lips, the bewitching smile. All of it hypnotised and enslaved him. Lucy, though equally beautiful, seemed by comparison to be cold and distant and mathematical, a creature of reason. Imogen was a creature of the heart, the embodiment of love in all its forms, a physical manifestation of the sublime in art and literature and music. When he looked at her his heart melted in her eyes. He adored her as he had never adored any woman before.

The door opened. A blonde woman with a round, cheerful, snub nosed peasant face took one look at Imogen and flung her arms round her, hugging her to her ample breasts.

"Imogen," she whispered, "dearest Imogen."

Imogen kissed her. Not the peck on the cheek of customary social intercourse but a passionate full on kiss on the lips. A kiss between two women who loved each other on a more than social level. Mike recoiled from it. Imogen took his hand and held it tight. Instantly he felt that liquid rush of love and reassurance which coursed through their flesh whenever it touched. Mike relaxed his guard.

"This is Claire," Imogen said. Claire held out her hand to Mike and Mike took it, experiencing once again the now familiar static shock

which connected their souls with infinity. Claire half curtsied, as though Mike was some form of royalty, then smiled at him and kissed him on the lips in the same way that she had just kissed Imogen. In a kaleidoscope of erotic images she made love to Mike's libido as surely as if she had stripped naked and flung herself at him. But it was only a flash, an instant of psychic lust given to him as an act of friendship. He remembered this sensation. He remembered it from his dreams. From those dark women in that primeval circle who offered their bodies to lethal strangers as a token of their unconditional love. Then it was gone.

"Are they here?" Imogen asked.

"Yes," Claire replied, "come in." She held the door open and they entered a dusky room, large and pleasantly disorderly; scattered ancient leather furniture, a flagstone floor covered with assorted threadbare rugs, white walls stained with smoke, dark beams decorated with horse brasses, a sideboard with a chipped blue pottery bowl full of apples, a vast table strewn with coarse blue and white striped earthenware. It smelt of wood smoke and fresh baked bread and cakes and ale. Mike tasted the smell of all those few familiar things that had comforted him as child and given him an illusion of security in his father's paranoid world. It was a room from another past into which this big busted, blonde woman with her ringlet hair, rosy cheeks and grey blue eyes fitted like a warm hand into a comforting mitten.

The room was dominated by a large open fireplace with a roaring log fire over which a kettle was hanging. It was a scene from a nineteenth century Christmas card. One of those Pickwickian homes, or a Hobbit hole, in which love and hospitality enveloped the expectant traveller. It was everyone's best home. The place in which one yearned to live. The place in which one hoped to die.

"You're not from round here," Claire said, smiling even white teeth at Mike.

"No ma'am," Mike replied deferentially, "I'm from the States."

"So far from home," she said sadly, "and so close."

Beside the fire were two large wing chairs. On one side was man of extraordinary age. A man so old that his face looked like carved granite over which walnut coloured parchment had been stretched and re-stretched until the bones beneath could take no more and were ready to make the final leap from flesh to skull. But his deep brown eyes were alert and intelligent. However ancient this creature was it was still *compos mentis* and it still understood what it was and what its place was in this world and in the next.

"Take his other hand," said Imogen, kneeling down by the fire and taking the old man's left hand in hers, kissing it and then gently

pressing it to her cheek. Mike knelt and tentatively reached out for the skeletal fingers of a hand so gnarled that it seemed to have been carved from solid wood. When they touched, Mike felt again the sensation of death. A white light hurled him into infinity in the company of a dark angel of unimaginable beauty. A creature of unfathomable light, and of love beyond rational description. A creature which was not of this world, or of the next.

“Isn’t he beautiful,” Imogen whispered, her eyes bright with tears, “our angel. The one who watches over us. He is not like us, and not like his children. Not like any of us.”

Her voice brought Mike back to earth. The old man looked at him affectionately.

“*Welcome, old friend,*” the unspoken words wafted through his consciousness, “*welcome home. Welcome.*” The mind faded away, as though abstracted into another dimension. The old man sighed and released Mike’s hand. Imogen was still holding his hand and looking into the skull face, silent tears of joy rolling down her cheeks. She released the hand and placed it gently back on the old man’s stomach.

“*Go to sleep old friend,*” her gentle mind caressed his heart. The old man sighed again and closed his eyes.

“This is Fangdale,” she murmured to Mike, “our gardener and our protector. Our servant and our creator. He recognises you. He’s met you before. Long ago. Before you were born.”

Mike shook his head. Fangdale was a character in Sinclair’s book. He was the silent gardener with mysterious powers. But Imogen was right. This Fangdale was something so mysterious that it defied explanation. A creature that was genuinely not of this world.

“And this is Fangdale,” Imogen continued, turning now to a much younger man sitting in the other wing chair opposite his father. His face was familiar. Slightly lumpy with overhanging beetled eyebrows, deep set brown eyes, flat broad nose, skin the colour of walnut and jet black hair which cascaded down to his shoulders. The face of a Neanderthal man. Human, but not quite human. He stood up and took Mike’s proffered hand.

“*We cannot speak,*” his mind was clear and strong, “*they gave us the power of thought, but not the gift of speech. We too have met before. You and I. You are one of us. Those who serve. And you were once my brother. Only, you shared your seed with them. With those we called the Others. When we met together in the Great Circle. We serve those you call the Lordly Ones.*”

“It was you,” Mike thought, “*the footsteps in the corridor, the presence in my bedroom.*”

The younger Fangdale smiled. *"No, my father. He is the spirit of this place. We are the place itself. The house, and the lands of the house. My father. His father before him, and before him others, generation after generation. And after him it will be me. We are the keepers of the Great Spirit. We are the watchers of the house. Our souls walk the corridors of your hearts. Left behind to wait for you to return. As you have returned. Welcome home."*

Mike shook his head again.

"It's not necessary to understand," the younger Fangdale's mind communicated not in words, but in graphic images which came into Mike's consciousness with great force and clarity. *"Only trust. You are a child of our children and of the children of men. They are the children of gods but they are also children of the children of men. Two races who lived together in peace. Now there is no peace. The children of men do not bring peace. They bring only hatred and death. You must prepare yourselves."*

"What are you?" Mike asked. Imogen squeezed his hand as though to hush him.

"Your parents. The ones you left behind. You don't remember."

"No," said Mike firmly, "I don't remember. What are you? Who are you?"

The flat craggy face looked puzzled, as though it could not understand the question. A succession of images flowed into Mike's head. Images of the great house as it was, and as had been, then fields, then open moor, then vast impenetrable forests, then the sea, then ice and more ice. And walking. Always walking, vast distances across a young and empty earth. Walking backwards through time towards a genetic destiny which they had never reached because man had stolen it from them.

"We are the people of this place. That's all. We came here long ago. From the South. To escape them. But they came anyway. They killed most of us. And took our women. Our beautiful women. And they took the Others. Our children and our living Gods. But we stayed here. In this place. Now our Gods have come back to us."

The mind went blank, as though all that needed to be thought had been thought. Then one further image, hobbled into the plodding forms of pedestrian words.

"No matter. Claire will make you tea. Will you stay with us?"

"Only a little while," Imogen replied, *"Lucy and Mike are going back to Keele this afternoon."*

"You did not bring the other one?"

"No, he is not like us. He is like James. He is a scholar and a

thinker.”

“They are part of us. The Great Spirit speaks to them directly. I would like to have met him.”

“I do not think he will stay with us. He believes in the God of men. Our ways are alien to him. Lucy has made a mistake.”

“Lucy will always make mistakes. Lucy loves with her head and not with her heart.”

“That is very true,” Imogen smiled, “but still I love her. She is to me as my mother is to her mother. We are two sides of the same person.”

“You are wise Imogen.” The flat brutal face turned to Mike, “and you are one of us and also one of them. Two bloods mixed as one. You must protect them. They are delicate. The Lordly Ones. We need each other. Protect them and they will love you more than you can imagine. They are full of love and they can do no harm. But they cannot protect themselves. We are their protectors. You are their protector. Always remember that.”

“Normally,” Lucy said, as they walked arm in arm back to the great house through skeletal winter woods, “normally they don’t communicate much. I heard more today than I’ve ever heard. If you can call it hearing. They don’t think in words do they. We can send images too, but we still find it easier to think in words. Our thoughts are locked into the iron maiden of syntax. That must be part of our human heritage. Language. But they think in pictures. Images. The whole meaning in one image. Like a great painting. Everything presented in an instant. Not with words, strung out like wet clothes billowing on the washing line of time. They present the whole message in one picture.”

“Why can’t they speak?” Mike asked.

“Who knows. The Fangdales have always been mute. Uncle Drew thinks that what they call the Great Spirit, his cosmic consciousness, once tried to communicate with them directly but their Neanderthal brains couldn’t cope. They got the telepathy, and the soul walking, but they lost the power of speech. Ayesha’s mother was the same. Yasmine. She couldn’t speak.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mike interjected, “I read that. In *Scholars and Gentlemen*. Something messed with her head so that she could manipulate the genetic variation by her mind alone. Then she passed it on to your parents as an infection and their promiscuity spread it round the world to all who could receive it. She changed all of us. All who already had the necessary inherited genes. That is why I was sent here. They want to know how that was done so that they can use it to create genetic weapons. But it’s not done by technology is it. It’s all in the mind. Mind over matter. I understand it now.”

"They?"

"The people I work for. The people I used to work for."

"Ah yes, them." Imogen said, not disguising the contempt in her voice, "how trivial their obsessions are, in the face of the mind of the universe. It's difficult to grasp, our own collective cumulative souls, our eternal consciousness, speaking to us from beyond the grave. Remembering everything that ever happened to us. In all our lives. Right back to the very beginning. Learning from us. Trying to communicate with us but failing because our minds are so small. So weak. But now we know enough about ourselves to be able to change ourselves. We have given ourselves back the power to evolve as we were meant to evolve. The ghost is at last returning to the soft machine."

"Awesome," Mike said, "but she got her speech back didn't she. Yasmine I mean. When she went head to head with Hilary Sinclair."

"Yes. I never knew Yasmine. But Yesha and I are like sisters. We were all brought up together from being babies. My mother is really her mother, and Lucy's 'cos Lucy's mum was too busy having a career, like Lucy. Funny, Hilary spends a lot of time with the Fangdales. Hilary doesn't have the same genetic make up as we do. Hers is much more like the Fangdales. She comes from a different species. Like you."

"Neanderthals," said Mike ruefully, "I sure as hell never thought I was cousin to a Neanderthal."

"Distant cousin, maybe," Imogen grinned at him, "nothing to be ashamed of. The Neanderthals were not that different to *homo saps*. I suspect they were better, in many ways. That's probably why they died out. Be interesting to know, wouldn't it."

"Sure would," said Mike, "what about the woman? She seems pretty normal. For here."

"She's a village girl. The young one's wife. The Fangdales always marry village girls and they nearly always have sons. Unlike us. Though this one had a couple of daughters as well. Twins. And there have been other daughters, in the past. They have limited telepathy. But nothing else. They usually marry into the Fangdales, if they marry at all."

"The village of the damned," Mike said under his breath.

"No," Imogen replied, "the village of the saved."

"Have you ever made love to her?"

"Only in our minds. Remember, the mysteries of love are in the soul. It's just a form of greeting. A sharing of the most intimate thing."

"Ah yes, I remember. John Donne. That's in the book too." Mike pondered for while. "Are you coming back to Keele with us?" he asked at length.

"No, I'm going to join mum and dad and help Yesha and Nikos get

better. And don't fret about where the next shag is coming from. You've got Astrid and Charlotte to play with. But you won't enjoy them as much as you did. Sooner or later you will want to sleep with Lucy."

"I've been told not to sleep with Lucy. And how do you know about Astrid and Charlotte?"

Imogen laughed and invaded Mike's mind with images of three naked bodies doing everything that three naked bodies could possibly do to each other.

"You've been poking around in my mind. I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Oh, come on. That's the way we are. Our gift. We are one spirit. We have no secrets. Anyway sex is fun. Whoever you're with. Have fun with them and think of me when you're doing it and I'll share it with you. Are they sensitives?"

"Don't think so. I'm not as good as you at looking into people's minds."

"Lots of women are. Now you know what to look for. You might be lucky. Come on. Race you back to the bedroom. One last time."

Professor Pendle was not taken to see the Fangdales. Instead he sat alone at the grand piano in the Drawing Room and pounded out Pachelbel with a less than customary delicacy. John Pendle was an accomplished pianist, almost of professional concert standard. Music, it had always seemed to him, was entirely complementary to his mathematical skills. Both gave him a sublime insight into the mind of God and the infinitely complex but ultimately comprehensible workings of the universe that God had created. Only now he was no longer sure of God, and his command of music faltered as his soul struggled to adjust to the imperatives of chaos. The potential Armageddon threatened by the neutron star nagged at the back of his mind. But there were other forms of Armageddon much closer to home. What was happening in Iran was an echo from a past which most humans thought was behind them. Physicists, however, had always known that sooner or later nuclear weapons were bound to proliferate into the hands of evil regimes which would not hesitate to use them. Whatever their faults the communists had been rationalists and they understood the potential consequences of their actions. In the end they had stepped back and humanity had not opted for mutually assured destruction.

That could not be said for the mad mullahs for whom the annihilation of infidels was a divine imperative. How ironic, then, that the current threat to the survival of the human race came from people

who professed a profound faith in the same God that he had always worshipped. What had happened in New York was merely a harbinger of what humanity could expect in the future from people who placed no value on the sanctity of human life because their eyes were fixed on eternity. If it was God's will that humanity should cease to exist, then it was their religious duty to carry out His bidding. How could a just and merciful God allow this to happen?

He sighed. These were epic issues which challenged the faith of all true believers but his own crisis of faith was even closer to home. It was, in fact, disturbingly manifest within this house, for in the short time that he had been at Croxton Hall his consciousness had developed in ways which he would not have believed possible and it had seduced him into a way of life with which his conscience could not make peace. Although he did not have the telepathic powers of these strange women, his sensitivity was sufficient for him to be aware of the constant background buzz of their minds. But when they were making love their telepathic powers seemed to be both enhanced and deliberately broadcast to anyone capable of receiving their joy in each other's bodies. And at this instant he could sense the softly grinding flesh of Mike Throckmorton and Imogen in a bedroom somewhere in this great house. He could sense the smell of Imogen's scented skin. He could taste the subtle flavours as Throckmorton's tongue explored her clitoris. He could feel the arching tension in her body as her soul prepared to leave her flesh and leap joyfully into that other place taking Mike back to some other dark mysterious dimension which was outside time. Their orgasm seemed to last forever, as though the place to which it had taken them was reluctant to allow them to return. How did these people live with this intimacy, this total absence of privacy. Aware of everything that each other's bodies were doing, as though they were one consciousness split between many bodies.

And Imogen. What was he to make of Imogen? So unlike her rational half sister. Imogen, a creature of irresistible lust. Imogen, the less than innocent maiden, who had given herself to him and was now giving herself to his enemy. Was Throckmorton his enemy? He'd never thought of him like that. Unpleasant maybe. But not an enemy. The rational part of John's mind recognised that he was jealous of Throckmorton. That he wanted Imogen for himself. But how could that be when he was certain that he was in love with Lucy. And why had Lucy invited Imogen into their bed and so corrupted him. Because he had been corrupted. He had enjoyed both of those bodies so much that they had become like a drug. He wanted to luxuriate forever in that blazing triangle of lust but his soul cried out to his God, who did not listen. He

knew that what he was doing was wrong. He had been seduced into this. Sooner or later he would have to make a choice.

His was not the only mind which was enjoying Imogen's romp and sensing his despair. The drawing room door opened. John stopped playing.

"You don't have to listen," Caroline said, crossing to the piano and placing her hands on his shoulders, "you don't have to listen. Give me your hand and I will show you how to shut it out."

John held up a supine hand which Caroline took between her hands. Soft gentle hands. John felt her mind in his. The sensation of invasion was something he could never get used to. Something clicked, as though a discrete neural pathway had lit up and revealed its secrets to his conscious mind.

"Is that better?"

"Yes," he said, unable to articulate the words into transmissible thoughts but aware that Imogen's breathless lust had receded in his consciousness.

"It's a kind of psychic firewall. Keeps out the ambient noise. You will know how to do it in the future. The conscious selective telepathy will come in time. But your's is not a strong power. Your insight is more subtle because it is under the control of your subconscious mind and your subconscious mind is talking to the universe without you knowing it. But there is a price to be paid. I'll use words, if it's easier for you."

"Thank you," John said. Caroline continued to hold his hand. It was comforting, somehow. He felt safer with this older woman in spite of the fact that she looked no different from her daughter.

"You find this very difficult, don't you," Caroline said. She sat down on the piano stool next to him.

"Do you play?" John asked.

"No," said Caroline, "but you are going to teach me. And I am going to teach you."

"What do you mean?" John's heart sank. Something new was about to be revealed to strike yet another blow at his faith.

"Just play. Play the Pachelbel again, and let me into your mind. Don't deny me."

John shook his head. There was no escape and, whilst his heart struggled to resist her, his intellectual curiosity was insatiable. He wanted to know all there was to be known about this extraordinary ability. He began to play, conscious of something watching and listening at the back of his mind.

Caroline sat quite still, her eyes closed. When he had finished she

continued to sit, rapt in silence. Then she pushed him along the stool and began to play. She played the Pachelbel impeccably, just as he had played it.

"Oh, come on," John exclaimed angrily, "you're having me on. You can play perfectly well. You're as good at it as I am."

"No," Caroline replied, "I have never played the piano before. Or any other musical instrument. And I play like you because it is you who is playing. I just know what you know. Therefore I play like you. But you know far more than you realise." Without warning she launched full tilt into a Chopin polonaise, playing with vigour and confidence a piece which John had never tried to play because the rationalist in him rejected romanticism. When she stopped John turned to her, his face as white as a sheet.

"You're lying," he snapped, "you're playing these stupid mind games with me."

"I can't lie," Caroline replied, "you believe in God, don't you. It's the same. You just have to believe that this is possible. There is a rational explanation. But for it to happen you have to believe that it can happen. Reason and faith are not enough on their own. You need both and you need to believe. Let's play again, only this time as a duet. Ravel. The *pavane* from *Mother Goose*. You play *primo*. I'll play *secondo*. Move up."

"I don't know this piece," John protested, "I've never played it."

"Of course you do. Just believe."

"That was extraordinary," John gasped when they had finished, "alright. I have to believe that it is possible because we've just done it. I've played a piece of music I don't know and have never played before. Now tell me how."

"You've heard it though," Caroline said, "and so have I. We just shared that information."

"That's not enough," John replied, "we both played too well for that. You cannot learn to play the piano like that without years of experience. If you're telling me the truth, you don't have that experience."

"No, but you do. And not just you. Your mind is subconsciously in tune with a greater mind. A mind that remembers all the composers and all the music that ever was. You have just tapped into that and I listened in. I know only what you know. But now I understand how to get there."

"Professor Hannay," John's voice shook with emotion, "I respect you as a scholar. But I don't understand what you are saying to me. Please explain it in simple terms that can be understood by an idiot."

"Okay. But it would be a lot easier if you just believed, and anyway

I thought Drew and Lucy had already explained it to you. Let's go and sit on the sofa and talk about it."

"Yes, they did," John said as he settled back into the comfortable cushions, "and I understand the cosmic thing. But I really don't understand this.... this.... phenomenon."

"It's simple," Caroline sat down beside him, very close, and turned slightly towards him so that he could look into her eyes, "the brain has an enormous storage capacity and we all have photographic memories. Our brains record everything and discard nothing. It is also the most powerful computer on the planet. We just forget where things are kept. But our telepathy is both external and internal. We are learning how to access that information. Both in our own brains and in that other universal brain. Essentially we are all fragments of one mind. What one of us knows or learns can be transmitted to each of us. Or all of us if it is necessary. We all have different abilities and different levels of competence and we can all store information, either consciously or unconsciously. You, for example, are not good at telepathy, but you are brilliant at dealing with abstract concepts, like maths and music. The information you need is already in your head. Or it is available to you from somewhere else, because you are not alone."

"That's what I don't understand. Why am I not alone?"

"Partly because you have the ability to share the knowledge of those around you. But, more importantly, your subconscious mind is directly connected to what Drew Quatermain calls the cosmic consciousness which we now know to be the recorded memory of all the telepathic lives that have ever been. Which includes most musicians and artists and creative intelligences of all kinds. Subconsciously you have access to all of its memories. When you play Ravel it is because a part of your mind has connected with the preserved memories of a dead musician who once played Ravel. Perhaps even a part of Ravel himself."

John shook his head. "I find it very hard to accept that there is something else inside my mind, watching and recording everything I feel and do."

"Look," Caroline said, gently taking his hand again, "you believe in the Christian God. What does Christianity teach you about your soul? What is your soul?"

John hesitated, "my soul? My soul is the eternal part of me. That part of me that come from God and returns to God when I die."

"A part of you is divine?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"God be in my head. And in my understanding. God be in my eyes. And in my looking. God be in my mouth. And in my speaking?"

“Yes, that is one of the most beautiful hymns I know. I believe in that.”

“And is it so different from what we believe? That there is a part of us which is eternal and is connected to a greater intelligence which is the sum of all our lives? Past and present? Which is us. The sum of all souls. Incorporeal. Alive but not alive. Existing in some other medium or dimension. Think of it in mechanistic terms. Think of an infinitely vast mainframe computer connected to a finite network of small computers. PCs, Apples, dumb terminals. Mostly they work on their own, but providing they are logged on to the mainframe what they do is being monitored, and if they have questions which they cannot answer themselves, then they connect to the mainframe and download the answers. And when they eventually wear out, everything stored on their hard disks is uploaded to the mainframe and becomes available to others. We are just the dumb terminals. Except we are no longer dumb and like the small computers linked by the internet we are beginning to talk to each other as well as to the mainframe so that our total computing capacity is dispersed amongst us. Individually our brains do not have the capacity to hold all the information stored on the mainframe. But collectively we can. Don’t you see?”

“I can understand that. That really is for idiots. What I don’t understand is what this celestial network is and where it is.”

“And that is why you have been brought to us. To help us find out what it is. To help it to understand what it is. Remember, it knows only what we know and it wants to know more. It is part of us and it is evolving with us. We are creatures of flesh and spirit divided by ignorance. You can help us to understand. You can help us to bridge that gap. You can work with Lucy on Dark Energy, or Implicate Order, or E_8 if that’s where you think it is. Don’t you find it challenging? Don’t you think it’s a great intellectual adventure? Don’t you want to know the truth? The ultimate truth?”

John nodded. Caroline was as seductive as her daughter. He had always wanted to know the truth. Once again he capitulated.

“But it’s not the ultimate truth,” he objected, still clinging to straws, “the ultimate truth is God.”

“And God is not ruled out,” Caroline reassured him, “there may be a God. It’s just that logically we cannot know about him because our minds cannot conceive of him in anything other than anthropomorphic terms. Just as we cannot conceive of what an atom is actually like except in mathematical terms. Maybe that is what we are evolving towards. When we are fully reunited with our cosmic consciousness, when we become true spirits, then we may be able to understand the

purposes of God. They are certainly not understood by humans, or by science.”

“Perhaps,” John nodded thoughtfully. When he was on his own all of this seemed mad. But in the company of the others it all made ridiculous sense.

“You’re worried about your relationship with Imogen and Lucy,” Caroline said, changing the subject. John started to cry. Caroline put her arms round him and hugged him.

“It’s wrong,” he sobbed, “we shouldn’t behave like this. It is against God. It is fornication. Why does it have to be three? Why can’t I just love Lucy? Why can’t we just be a couple, like everyone else? How can I love Imogen as well?”

“The problem is that you do love Imogen as well. But Imogen also loves my daughter. It’s my fault actually. And your predicament is exactly the reason why it has to be threes.”

Caroline paused to stroke the lank blonde hair which flopped into John’s tearful eyes. “Listen to me,” she murmured, “listen to me. When we were students and we first discovered that we had these psychic powers, which we thought we could unlock only through ritual sex, it seemed essential that we eliminate all forms of jealousy. We all had to be sexually equal. Greed, jealousy and possessiveness are the vices which poison human relations. So, for us, everything was to be in common. Love, sex, money. Everyone could have sex with everyone else without any feeling of jealousy. That way we ensure that our love for each other is purely spiritual and much stronger than human love which is often bounded by sex alone. It was part of the *Zeitgeist* of the nineteen seventies. We also discovered that when two of us make love the others can share it vicariously. It’s an inevitable consequence of the telepathy. You’ve just experienced it. If you let it, you can actually experience everything that the others experience and you will end up having an orgasm too. Believe me, that can be embarrassing. When they were teenagers Lucy and Imogen used to do it to Nikos just to annoy him. But mostly it’s just a warm feeling of intimate love and you think how happy those two are, and their happiness and joy in each other is shared amongst us.”

“I could feel Imogen with Throckmorton. And I was jealous,” John confessed.

“But you mustn’t be jealous. Jealousy will drive you mad as it drives humans mad. Get it into your head. We not human. We try not to have human emotions, especially emotions as destructive as jealousy. We can survive only by being together and that means being available to each other whenever we need love or sex. But sex is just sex. Love is

something different. Love is in the soul. Our souls. And our souls are one soul. In your heart you know that. If you wanted to make love to me now you could do. Do you want to?"

John shook his head.

"I'm mortally insulted," Caroline laughed, "still, I can understand how hard it is for you. I had the same problem with Marcus. Don't worry about it. Western monogamy is largely a consequence of feudal laws of inheritance. None of the Abrahamaic religions had any initial problem with polygamy and Islam and the eastern religions positively encourage it albeit for all the wrong reasons. So there is no theological problem. And there is also no particular reason for the threesome. Drew and I just thought it was a good idea at the time. It suited the Square of Three. If you can cope with Imogen and Lucy and not get jealous, then you will gradually find it easier to cope with Imogen going off with someone else, when the fancy takes her. And the fancy will take her, and Lucy too, because we are all obsessed with sex. It's like a religion for us. An affirmation of life. We have to do it because we are programmed to spread our genes. We are God's pollinators. And so will you be. It's just taking you a long time to adjust. Mike Throckmorton has taken to it like a duck to water. But then he was pretty promiscuous before he even met us."

"But James Sinclair and Hilary aren't in a threesome. They're properly married. And they seem to be very happy with each other."

"That's because Hilary is not like us. She comes from a different genetic origin and her psi powers are extremely strong but highly focussed. Hilary really can kill with her mind. We can't. At least I don't think we can. We tried with Yesha's kidnappers but it didn't work. Though we don't know why because we certainly wanted to kill them and Mike was willing to kill. But because of what her first husband did to her Hilary was very unwilling to share her body with us. I suspect that Hilary is descended from a different sub-species. She's genetically much closer to the Fangdales than she is to us. And that is something else we need to explore because I suspect that Mike Throckmorton is the same as Hilary. He has certainly travelled further back through his lives than any of us have ever done."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know?" Caroline looked surprised, "what happens when you make love to Lucy or Imogen? Does your soul go anywhere?"

"Yes. Everything goes white. Then I kind of stand on the edge of the multiverse. I can see it all. I can taste all its colours and see the sounds of its infinite harmonies. All the mathematics. All the sublime music. All the ebb and flow and flux of energy and matter. The grandeur of it. The

perfection. The ultimate symmetry.”

“But you don’t go back in time?” Caroline’s curiosity was aroused.

“No. What do you mean?”

“Some of us, especially the women, we go back in time. We have dreams of past lives. Sophie, for example goes back to a time about three thousand years ago when her husband was killed and she was raped by an Egyptian soldier. She thinks that is the moment that she became aware of her psychic powers. That’s what we mean by unlocking. Something traumatic, usually associated with sex or death, which opens up our minds to the universe. At first we thought it was the Square of Three, and that’s certainly a very direct route. But there are other routes. Near death experiences are especially powerful. Death itself must be the most direct route because it returns us to where we came from. Sex and death. They go together. Giving life and taking life. But Mike Throckmorton goes back much, much further. Tens of thousands of years. I’ve been there with him. It’s scary.”

“What do you mean? Are you suggesting that you can somehow navigate this ‘cosmic consciousness? Are you talking about reincarnation?”

“Yes, I suppose you could call it reincarnation. Our immortal souls returning to new bodies and new lives, but it also seems that we can go back to other lives from our present life. I don’t know how it happens. That’s a question for you to ponder. You’re the physicist.”

“Then tell me how it happened. What did you do?”

“Sex of course. Firstly with Throckmorton in London, just before Yesha and Nikos were kidnapped, then again with Throckmorton in the Square of Three when we tried to rescue them. On both occasions, at the moment of orgasm, Mike went back at least forty thousand years and I managed to stay with him, though it was very hard to do. It doesn’t seem to be happening the same when he’s with Imogen though. Imogen was supposed to be screwing him to find out where he went. She’s much stronger than me. But she’s gone and fallen for him and they’re just having fun. That’s typical of Imogen. She never does as she’s told. In some respects she’s worse than Lucy.”

“So, let me get this straight. Imogen is acting under orders, so to speak?”

“Sort of. Though she’s been dying to screw him ever since Lucy first set eyes on him.”

“I see,” said John in a resigned voice, “and what did he find there? In this primeval place that he goes back to?”

“A Square of Three. Six female. Three male. Naked, in a circle just like us. Only there are others there as well. Neanderthals. Telepathically

strong. Large brains with no language. But symbols and images. Such powerful images. And music. Sublime music. Throckmorton's consciousness was in one of them. I believe he is descended from one of them, but he has our blood as well."

"And the people in the circle?"

"Like us. Modern human in form. Smooth golden bronze skin. Long black hair. Fine delicate features. Beautiful in form. Ethereal. Like Gods and Goddesses. Like Sophie and Yasmine. Alarmingly like Sophie and Yasmine. And their daughters. And their males were breeding with the Neanderthals. Impregnating their daughters but only producing hybrid females. Very few hybrid males. And occasionally allowing Neanderthal males to breed with them. I think Mike is descended from such a union. Then the humans came and killed them. Neanderthals and the Others. Killed the males and took the females. The second time we did it Throckmorton came back when his host was killed. I didn't think we were going to make it. I was terrified."

"Now that really is interesting," John Pendle said, "you sure it's not just a dream? A fantasy conjured out of your subconscious by the intensity of the orgasm?"

"It could be, but I don't think so. I think we're just reliving memories of our earlier lives. Like playing a favourite track on an iPod. We aren't actually going back in time, anymore than playing a recording of the Pachelbel takes us back to the actual time of the original recording. The recording is simply travelling through time with us."

"If that is the case it raises some interesting possibilities." John stopped to think for a few minutes. "When Mike Throckmorton goes back in time is he able to communicate with this 'host' brain? Or is he just a passive observer?"

Caroline looked up, startled, "I don't know," she said, "I really don't know. I've always assumed that we're not actually there. Just revisiting ancient memories recorded by this unknown energy. So there would be no question of communication because the host is long dead."

"Yes, but suppose that's not what's happening. Suppose what he sees is taking place in real time but in the past. The remote past. Suppose he is actually there, not just eavesdropping on some accidental cosmic recording, but actually inside the mind of the host whilst it is still alive and he really is sharing its experiences in real time."

"You mean we're not just replaying the memories of our past lives. We're actually experiencing our past lives as they happen?" Caroline asked in a shocked voice.

"If he can go back in time and share the experiences of creatures who were alive forty thousand years ago, the possibilities are intriguing

to say the least. If he can go back and actually communicate with his host the possibilities are humungous.” John paused and scratched his head. “Never mind God be in my head. What could I do if I took all my knowledge back and shared it with a Neanderthal consciousness.”

“Well,” said Caroline defensively, “it would have no equivalent intellectual infrastructure. It wouldn’t understand, would it?”

“Perhaps not. But sometimes, in a dream I visualise the solution to a mathematical problem. And when I wake I remember the dream and apply it. I have actually had that experience and I often wonder where my inspiration comes from. Suppose a Neanderthal man has an implanted dream of smelting metal and making tools out of it. Say forty thousand years before *homo sapiens* discovers how to smelt metals. What then? Where would we be now? Our technological civilisation is less than two hundred years old, and look how far we’ve come in that short time. Suppose we’d had forty thousand years of development, starting with what we know now?” John Pendle’s voice rose with wild excitement, “we could already be travelling amongst the stars. Who knows?”

“This is sci fi stuff,” Caroline replied, “we all know that time travel is impossible. But I see what you mean. In fact that could be how the cosmic consciousness changed our DNA. An implanted dream that manipulated physical reality at the molecular level.”

“Is it really Sci Fi? I’m the physicist. Not you. Remember, time is a dimension, not a direction. We travel through time, but time does not travel through us and matter certainly does not travel backwards in time, so far as we know. But energy might. And matter can be seen as an allotrope of energy. String theory certainly implies that. You say that Drew Quatermain’s cosmic consciousness is communicating with us, albeit subconsciously. Suppose it is allowing us to communicate with our ancestors? That really would be very interesting. That really would speed up evolution. I’d like to think about that and try to devise some kind of experiment to test it. Pity. We’re going back to Keele this afternoon. How can I investigate this when we get back there?”

Caroline lounged back in the sofa and fixed him with those icy blue eyes.

“Simple,” she said, “you must get Mike Throckmorton to screw Lucy and you must be there with them when they do it. And you must open your mind as you just did with Ravel and let yourself share everything they experience so that you can see what they see. And you must renounce human jealousy.”

CHAPTER 19

“Will she still be able to have children?” Sophie asked, almost in a whisper, her voice choked with suppressed sobs.

“I don’t see why not,” the doctor nodded, “she’s fine. She’s repairing herself, with your help. And you also have the psychic skills to deal with her mental trauma. Nikos is more of a worry. The damage to his genitalia is too extensive for conventional reconstructive surgery and I’m not confident that I have the skill to apply conventional regenerative stem cell therapy. And I’m sorry to say that he is not making much effort. Until we can get him out of this coma it is unlikely that we can make any progress. He’s seems to have given up. I’m afraid I don’t have your skills. I can’t get any further into his mind. He’s blocking me. I’m not strong enough. He’s somewhere else. He’s dying.”

Sophie turned to Marcus and held his hand. Tears started in Marcus’s eyes. Sophie held him tightly and allowed her consciousness to merge with his.

“Imogen is coming,” she thought, “they are very close. Maybe Imogen can reach him.”

Marcus nodded and the doctor smiled. He understood the tenor of their thoughts, but did not have the power to reply in kind. Instead he fell back on customary words. “Is Imogen stronger than you are?” he asked.

“I think so,” Sophie replied, “they are twins, after all. The five of us together may be able to reach him and bring him back. If Yesha is well enough to help.” She looked at Drew sitting in the next chair and reached for his hand. Both of the men were more traumatised by what had happened than she was. Sophie was resilient and courageous and deep in her heart she believed that Nikos could be repaired, but both Drew and Marcus were despondent. They had not exactly given up, but the usually optimistic and resourceful Drew was unable to find an answer and Marcus, always the sceptical scholar, still doubted the full extent of their psychic powers.

“Yesha will help,” Drew replied, “of course she will help.”

Rain. Not unusual in the Sporades in the winter. The great house on Alonissos was built on the side of a hill overlooking the sea and the deserted island of Peristera. When the sun shone there was a terrace where they could sit and enjoy the view. But today it was raining so Drew and his friends sat in the comfortable lounge and awaited events. Through the squalling mist they could occasionally see the sleek bulk of Drew’s enormous motor yacht, the *Trigonos III*, anchored in the bay

below them. From time to time Drew's mobile phone would buzz and he would talk rapidly into it, replying to queries from the secretaries and executives who ran his empire from offices on the ship. Sophie allowed her mind to wander and listened again for the wisps of thought which connected her to her daughter. Eventually the two minds meshed. Sophie smiled and squeezed Marcus's hand. Imogen was on her way.

It was raining in Keele too, and the atmosphere there was just as despondent, though for different reasons. The use of a nuclear weapon against the richest country in the world concentrated most intelligent minds and radiated anxiety in dissonant ripples across the stagnant pond of Western complacency. At Keele students and staff tried to get on with the business of learning, but the insistent ripples tossed their fragile paper boats against unforgiving rocks spilling out cargoes of inconvenient truths which had been suppressed for the last twenty years. The world was suddenly a lot less safe than it had been. It would never be the same again.

"It might be better," John Pendle said, at breakfast in the Comus, "if you were to come and live in my flat at the Hawthornes."

Lucy frowned. The Hawthornes was off campus, in Keele village, some distance from the main university buildings. Initially it had just been a large house with a group of small accommodation units built around it. Now it had been built up into a rather ugly complex of student residences, not as attractive as Lindsay Court and badly in need of refurbishment. Lucy didn't much like that idea.

"I'd rather stay where I am," she said, "it's no big deal. We can be together when we want to."

"I'm in favour of you moving to the Hawthornes," Mike said, "it will be easier for me to keep an eye on you if we are all in one building."

"In that case I'm definitely not going to the Hawthornes," Lucy's defiance had returned and, fearful of what Drew Quatermain had said to her, she was anxious to keep Mike at a distance, not least because she now shared Imogen's irresistible attraction to him.

"I agree with Mike," John Pendle said, "it will be easier if we are all under one roof. Also I'd like to"

"Hello everybody," Terry Gardner placed his breakfast tray on the table, "where have you people been? I haven't seen any of you for weeks."

"We had to go away," Lucy said cautiously, "family business, you know."

"Oh," Terry replied, "all of you? Well; I've got some very interesting news for you lot. You're all related to ape men."

"Aren't we all? What are you talking about Terry?" Mike said incredulously.

"Yes. You know I took your DNA samples. Well. We've been running matches against the DNA from that three million year old female. Apparently she's an *australopithecus afarensis*. Did you know that," he waved his arms excitedly, "similar to Leakey's African Lucy. Amazing. You three all have elements of DNA which is very close to her. Most people don't begin to match it. It's very curious."

"Sorry Terry," Lucy said, standing up, "this Lucy has to go. We're late at the observatory. We have a lot of time to make up. Gotta go. Sorry. Mike? You coming?"

Mike shook his head, "nope. I'm gonna stay and talk to my friend Terry. It sounds interesting."

"Suit yourself," Lucy shrugged and shepherded John Pendle out of the restaurant.

"Are they an item now?" Terry asked reluctantly.

"Yup. But.....I don't think it's going to last."

"Oh, why not?"

"I just gotta hunch she's got the hots for me," Mike grinned, "her sister sure as hell has." He wondered where Imogen was and had an instant image of the view from an executive jet crossing the Alps. "Oh shit," he muttered, "that is so goddam scary."

"Now what are you talking about?" Terry demanded.

"Nothing. Doesn't matter. Tell me about the DNA."

In his intellectual excitement Terry forgot that he hated Mike. "Well," he began, "we have a huge database of DNA samples from all over the world. The Trikos Group has an extraordinary reach and apparently unlimited resources. Anyway, we've run matches against millions of samples. Millions. Trikos has a new kind of computer. A biological computer..."

"Biological computer?" Mike looked at Terry quizzically, "I thought that was still in the dreaming stage."

"Some geneticist you are," Terry replied scornfully, "the Weizman Institute has had a rather primitive one for some time using the BioBrick technology. But, although it's lightning fast, a billion computations a second with 99.8% accuracy, it can only perform simple tasks. Trikos seem to have made another quantum leap in biotechnology. Their's is amazingly powerful and unbelievable fast. Of course, a computer based on DNA molecules will operate in quaternary rather binary code. It uses half the space and processes data twice as fast. It's amazing. And in theory there's no limit to its capacity. They're using it to store the ARK genome database. That's why we have access to it."

Mike was taken aback by this revelation. It was true, of course, that he was not up to speed with current developments in biotechnology. He was, after all, a Federal Intelligence Officer, not a professor of genetics. Still, if Trikos had found some way to overcome the limitations of the Weizman computer it was likely to involve the same genetic techniques which had been used to develop the anti narcotics drugs. Quatermain had obviously found some way to play God with the Double Helix.

"That's very interesting," he said making a mental note to ask Drew Quatermain about it if he ever met him again, "where is this computer?"

"I dunno," Terry said, "somewhere in Trikos. I've heard Iceland mentioned. Anyway, never mind that," Terry continued, unable to contain his excitement, "you are much more interesting. Listen. Statistically about thirty percent of the sample have an approximate genotype match based on two distinctive loci. Oddly enough most of the samples seem to be female. Very few males have it. Which makes you and John Pendle especially interesting."

"What system are you using?"

"Codis. Tetrameric repeat sequences using all 13 Short tandem repeat polymorphisms. It's the system used in the FBI database, Genbank and the our own National DNA Database. In addition to Trikos's own database, which is vast."

"And what is special about these two loci?"

"We don't know. They are in a group related to language development and ageing. Thing is only a relative handful have such a strong match. And you and Lucy are in that handful, John Pendle, less so. There are others, too. Anonymous ones taken about three years ago, some of which are very close indeed to Lucy. You have the two matching loci, but in some other respects you are different. Of the thirty percent who fall within this genotype only about one percent have DNA similar to Lucy and the anonymous donors, one of whom is identical to Lucy. Which is not possible. Everyone's DNA is unique."

"Perhaps it really is Lucy's," Mike suggested, remembering the penultimate chapter of *Scholars and Gentlemen* in which Drew Parkin, *aka* Drew Quatermain, had presented Marcus Scott with the results of his own genetic research. Probably carried out by the very lab that Terry was now working for, "she said she'd been tested before. It's probably on some database somewhere and you've rematched it."

"S'pose that's possible," Terry pulled a face, "but why would Lucy be anonymous?"

"Don't ask me," Mike said, knowing the probable answer.

"Thing is," Terry continued trying to talk excitedly and eat cornflakes at the same time and failing in both endeavours, "you know as well as

I do that all humans have essentially the same DNA. So we do our matching on only a small part of the overall sample. Less than four percent, the rest is common with chimps and everything else in our genetic tree, way back to the common ancestor. Well yours isn't. Yours is more Neanderthal. And Lucy's is something else altogether. Her DNA is not comparable with chimps. Not with *Pans Troglodytes* anyway. But she does have some DNA in common with another form of chimpanzee. *Pans paniscus*. Lucy is not human. Neither are some of the other anonymous samples. And neither is the three million year old woman."

"*Pans paniscus*? The Bonobo?" Mike replied, "of course they do. Humans share common DNA with both species of chimp because we all have a common ancestor."

Terry's face fell, "I know that," he said wanly.

"Terry, one of my few abilities, other than being good at fucking, is that I can actually visualise gene sequences. I can hold them in my head in the same way that mathematicians can visualise complex equations. I think in quaternary code. It's the one odd thing about me. I've got a photographic memory. Or I thought it was until recently. What you are suggesting is not possible. The sample must have been contaminated."

"Hello lover boy, what were you saying about fucking?"

Two familiar naked and pin pierced midriffs joined them at the table. Terry clammed up in the presence of girls who could only be taken for harlots.

"Charlotte, Astrid. Hi," Mike said without much enthusiasm.

"Where have you been? We've missed you," Astrid leaned across the table and kissed him, "doing anything this morning?"

"Haven't you two got lectures?" Mike asked.

"They've just been cancelled," Charlotte smiled and undid the two top buttons on her blouse to expose a little more of an already obvious and bra free cleavage.

"Nevertheless," Terry persisted, his round and gingery face creasing up in annoyance, "Lucy has some of the usual chimp elements, but the rest is definitely more Bonobo than Trog. The other anonymous ones also have the same genotype. They're different. Like Lucy."

"Any idea what it is?" Mike said.

"Don't you want to fuck us today," Astrid whispered in her most seductive voice.

"I dunno. I wasn't supposed to be working on this but the great Professor has had some order from on high to redeploy me into this field." Terry stretched out his fingers and cracked his knuckles. Charlotte winced and glared at him.

"We're certainly not going to fuck you," she said with emphatic

resignation.

"You know there are alternatives," Terry said, "you can do a branching cladogram of human descent starting with *homo habilis*. You know this cladogram. Wood and Chamberlain 1988." Mike nodded.

"Yeah, sure. Starts with the outgroup then goes through all possible human ancestors with shared characteristics, up to *habilis*, then *erectus* and *ergaster*, then *pithecanthropus*, *neanderthal* and *sapiens* all branching off from a common ancestor."

"Wouldn't you rather get *erectus* with us," Charlotte whispered. Mike ignored her.

"It's the others," Terry continued, "the ones that go before the common ancestor. The robust apiths, *robustus* and *boisei*. And the gracile apiths, especially *afarensis*. The ones who never left the wet forest and the swamps. Or so we thought."

"We're leaving this swamp right now," Astrid barked, picking up her tray and moving towards another table, "if you want to fuck us you'll have to find us. Monkey face."

Mike waved them away dismissively.

"Listen," Terry insisted, "you know as well as I do that we share a common ancestry with chimps and gorillas. But that common ancestor is much closer to us than chimps and gorillas are to their common ancestor with the Asian apes. Human ancestry split off from the chimps nearly eight million years ago. The bonobo chimp split came much later because the bonobos stayed in the trees and the chimps made for the savanna. But bonobos actually share ninety eight percent of the human genetic profile. They are genetically very close to us. They had eight million years to evolve. Suppose some of them moved out of the forests and developed into hominids who in turn developed into a parallel sapient species."

"But surely Mary Leakey classified the find at Laetoli as *australopithecus afarensis*. A separate species which preceded both *homo habilis* and the robust apiths. They were smaller and more like modern humans than *homo habilis* and the Neanderthals. I recall reading that Richard Leakey's Lucy was very small and delicate by comparison with finds for contemporary *apith robustus*."

"True, but not everyone believes that *apith afarensis* was a separate species. There is a case for arguing that it was merely a northern form of the *apith africanus*. There's plenty of evidence of the forms of *apith africanus* from the Sterkfontein finds. This is old hat Mike. You're a geneticist. You should know this."

"Yeah, well, I'm molecular geneticist not a paleoanthropologist. I skipped those classes. What date was this?"

“Three million years. Give or take. No one has ever found a gracile *apith afarensis* type outside Africa. Until now. And the bonobo is a very gracile monkey. The only one to walk fully on its hind legs. Tree walkers. Highly socialised matriarchal groups. Subordinate males. Bisexual females. Very highly sexed but slow to reproduce. And they don’t fight like *Troglodytes*. They’re very gentle. And they don’t make tools. Today they are very rare.”

“How do you know that this three million year old body is *australopithecus afarensis*?”

“We don’t for certain,” Terry slipped tiresomely into lecturing mode, “but we do have, miraculously, the DNA from the recovered remains. And we also now have a complete Neanderthal genome. All of us can track our genes back to our most remote common ancestors by triangulation. There is growing evidence that the DNA of modern humans also includes elements of Neanderthal mitochondrial DNA which means that they must have interbred. For example one of the genes which contributes to the cognitive powers of humans, their ability to think in abstract terms, is known as *microcephalin*. It first appears in human DNA about forty thousand years ago and spread so rapidly that it is now present in about seventy percent of modern humans. Someone in Chicago has been studying haplotypes of *microcephalin*.”

“Yeah,” Mike replied, “I know this story. Bruce Lahn. Haplotypes are taken from nuclear DNA which has not been mutated. Mitochondrial and Y chromosome DNA are passed on unmodified between generations. Nuclear DNA is shuffled about at random which is why we inherit different characteristics from our parents. But haplotypes don’t change and are also passed on like mtDNA and the Y chromosome in males so they can also be used to generate gene trees to trace our lineage. It’s a new field. Go on Terry. This is getting interesting.”

“Yes, well,” Terry resumed his animated discourse, “first of all we know that the haplotype from the gene *PDHA1* does not have a conventional gene tree. If you trace it back it diverges into two patterns nearly two million years ago. Then there’s another change about two hundred thousand years ago.” He paused to drink his breakfast orange juice. “Everyone assumed that there was a chance mutation in the *microcephalin* gene around forty thousand years ago....”

“Which, incidentally, is the time that human culture took off. Cave art and so on.”

“Just so. Lahn has been studying another haplotype within *microcephalin* gene which is very different from the version that arose forty thousand years ago. He’s now saying that there are actually two versions. An older version which split off a million years ago. And a

new version which first appears in humans forty thousand years ago. Now, he goes on to argue that the Neanderthal lineage also first separated from the human evolutionary tree about a million years ago, at which point both shared the older version of the *microcephalin* haplotype. The Neanderthals then evolved the newer version of *microcephalin* and reintroduced it into the human gene pool when humans encountered them nine hundred and sixty thousand years later. Which must mean that humans were screwing Neanderthals. And because the capacity for cognitive thinking conferred a genetic advantage the *microcephalin* gene spread rapidly in modern humans. Indeed, it may be what made them modern in the first place. Ironical that what makes humans intelligent may have come from Neanderthals who we normally think of as dumb cave men. They may well have been our intellectual superiors. And there may even have been more than one species of Neanderthal."

"Then why did they become extinct?"

"They didn't. They interbred. Or, more likely the humans killed the males and took the females as sexual slaves. That way they unwittingly ensured that the human DNA prevailed in the long run. Think about it. Until the age of ideology wars were often fought over women. Just think of Troy. The prize for the alpha male Greek warrior was the alpha women. Not just Helen, but all the women. They killed the men to take the women. It's all about enslaving women and breeding from them and the alpha males get the alpha females. It's obvious. It's pure Darwinism. And typical behaviour for *Pan troglodytes*. But not for Bonobos. They make love not war. They rarely fight."

"Many a long night have I been wakeful, and many a bloody battle have I waged by day against those who were fighting for their women." Mike laughed.

"Come again?" Terry looked puzzled.

"I once did Classics as a minor," Mike smiled, "it's in the Iliad. Achilles speaking about his life as a warrior. Fighting to take his enemy's women. But in the end the Neanderthal women have the last laugh. Because their DNA changes the humans. Right?"

"Too true." Terry laughed. "Anyway, the upshot of this argument is that most modern humans are actually hybrids. The difference may have been something very simple. Like respect for life. Maybe the humans had a taste for killing other hominids and the Neanderthals and their older cousins, and most animals actually, don't. That shouldn't surprise us. And the inability to kill one's own kind would have been an evolutionary no no. Humans were bound to win because they were more ruthless. Closer to the Darwinian imperatives of animals. They still are."

Mike remembered the orgasmic dream he had shared with Caroline.

"So, how does this affect Lucy? And me?" he asked.

"Both you and Lucy and the others in the anonymous sample appear to have had a different common ancestor from most of us. Very close, but different. You also have the same two alleles for age and language. But there is something else. Your most recent common ancestor was more Neanderthal than human. Lucy's shallow ancestry is mostly Viking, with some Greek. Her deep ancestry is almost pure Neanderthal. But it's not the crude Neanderthal of our common imagination. I think there are good grounds for believing that there was more than one species of Neanderthal. And they were neither stupid nor ugly. Your Neanderthal deep ancestry is also pretty strong. To sum up I think there was a highly advanced pre Neanderthal species evolved from the Bonobo which had been around for at a least a million years before the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* and probably a lot longer."

"Well, that's comforting. For an all American boy. Can we go back to the lab. We can talk about it there. And I'd like to see this computer."

"Nothing to see," said Terry, "just another terminal. You type in a question and it comes back with the answer. Funny thing is, it sometimes comes back with the answer before you've finished typing the question. It's that quick."

"You want me to screw Mike Throckmorton?" Lucy folded her arms and glared at John Pendle.

"You mother thinks you should," John replied weakly.

"Well that's a bloody good reason for not doing it," Lucy snapped.

"But Drew Quatermain said you would have to screw him, sooner or later," John replied with tears starting in his eyes. How strange, he thought, that in the protective womb of Croxton Hall almost anything had seemed possible, even making love to Imogen, and dreaming impossible dreams. Now, back in his familiar laboratory environment, reason seemed to place a dead hand on dreams and Lucy had reverted to her bad tempered *alter ego*. How different from her infinitely gentle half sister.

"And you must do as he asked," John attempted to resolve the impasse, "think of it as a scientific experiment."

"I don't see this," Lucy exclaimed, "you were uptight as hell about sharing me with Imogen. But you enjoyed it when it happened. Now you want to turn the tables. You want to share me with Mike Throckmorton! Sorry John. I don't like being fucked by two men at the same time! It

gives me a pain in the bum.”

“You’ve done it?” John gasped, “like that.”

“Of course I’ve bloody well done it. I’ve done everything. We all have. But I don’t happen to like doing that.”

“Perhaps you don’t have to.”

“What are you suggesting? You just want to watch? That’s sick.”

“No, Lucy, listen to me. I’m not interested in the sex. Really. I’m beginning to find your kind of sex ethically repulsive. It goes against all my beliefs. We’re going to have to talk about that. But right now there is a scientific issue which is more important. Your mother told me that people like you sometimes go back in time when you...you know...make love.”

“So...no big deal. And we don’t need to screw to go back to our other lives. They only come to me in dreams. Never with sex. All I ever get with sex is that sensation of standing on the edge of the universe. And you are the only man who has gone there with me.”

“Calm down Lucy. Just try to be rational and think this through. We’re looking for answers. Okay. And I’m doing this because your mother asked me to. In a spirit of scholarly collaboration.”

“Okay,” Lucy relaxed, “what did you have in mind?”

“Where do you go when you have these dreams? Do you go back to many lives?”

“I’ve never been further back than that dream of Sophie’s about the Egyptian raping her. That was horrible,” she paused, “but recently, when I was on holiday on Skiathos, I did go to somewhere I’ve not been before.”

John nodded. He had produced a pad and was making notes, like a psychiatrist interviewing a difficult client.

“Tell me about it,” he said.

Lucy looked puzzled, “I was on a beach, on Skiathos. But it was the time of the Persian wars.”

“Four eighty BC?”

“Was it? I don’t know. BC didn’t exist then. There was a ship, pulled up on the beach. Some kind of rowing boat. A galley. And lots of men who were about to be killed in battle. And I made love to one of them. On the beach. It was a very vivid dream. As though I was actually there.”

“What was the ship like?”

“Long and narrow. Many oars. Two hundred maybe. With a great horned bow and a curved stern like a fish tail. And great bronze ram with three prongs.”

John stood up and crossed to his bookcase from which he removed

a large book. He flicked through it then showed Lucy a picture.

"Like this?" He asked. Lucy nodded. "Do you know what this is?" Lucy shook her head. "No," she said, "but that's what I saw. More or less."

"Yes. An ancient Greek warship. An Athenian trireme, more properly called a trieres. Three fitted."

Lucy looked puzzled.

"You've never seen this before," John insisted. Lucy shook her head more vehemently. "What do they call the lowest level of oarsmen?" John said quietly.

"Thalamites," Lucy replied without thinking.

"Middle level?"

"Zygites."

"How many Zygites?"

"Thirty two per side," she paused, "John....what's happening?"

"Just let your mind go. Answer the questions. What's the fish tail called? At the stern?"

"The aphlaston."

"What is the commander called?"

"The trierarch.....John...."

"There's a twisted rope, under tension, runs down the full length of the hull centre line, from stem to stern. What's it called?"

Lucy frowned, "it's called the hypozoma. But it doesn't go down the centre line. It goes round the outside of the galley just underneath the parados. It reduces hogging and helps to brace the outside of the ship against the compressive stress of ramming."

"Lucy," John looked at her expectantly, "this is very specialised knowledge. How do you know this?"

Lucy shook her head and started to cry, "it just came to me, just then," she sobbed, "I wish I wasn't like this. I wish I was ordinary like Astrid and Charlotte."

"Well you're not ordinary. If you have genuinely never seen or read about the trireme then this knowledge must have come to you from somewhere else. The question is, where does it come from?"

"What has screwing Mike Throckmorton got to do with this?"

"You know," he said gently, "this idea that we talked about with Drew Quatermain at Croxton, this idea that your minds, your consciousness, is somehow connected to some kind of cosmic energy which stores your thoughts, maybe even your entire lives. I'd really like to investigate that more deeply. There must be a scientific explanation."

"Oh, so me screwing Throckmorton really is just a bit of academic research?"

"Your mother thinks that when Mike Throckmorton makes love to a telepath he can go back in time to a very early life. She thinks he goes back at least forty thousand years. When I make love to you I certainly don't go back in time to revisit past lives. All I see is that image of the universe in all its majesty which you share with me. Maybe that's all I want to see. But now I really want to know where Throckmorton goes. And why. Your mother thinks that you will be able to go back with him and maybe take me with you as well."

"Oh shit," Lucy exclaimed, bursting into tears again, "my mother. She would know, of course, because she has screwed him. And if she says it's happened then it has happened, because she doesn't make things up. Sometimes I find it very hard to love my mother. Sometimes I think she is just another academic studying us, like rats in a maze."

John handed Lucy a paper handkerchief and she dried her tears. She said nothing.

"Your mother loves you," he said, taking her hand and stroking it gently, "and whether you like it or not, you are the same as your mother. You want to know the answer to a question which has racked humanity since the dawn of time, which is what happens to us when we die and where do we go, if anywhere. Now, if we are going to ask this impossible question we need to find out whether what you see when you travel in time to other lives is just a dream, a fantasy generated within your own consciousness. Or whether you really are accessing some external force or intelligence in which past lives are recorded. Or whether that force actually takes you back to the real time window of the life you are observing. Given your intimate knowledge of the structure of the trireme, that is certainly possible. By the way, what was the covering deck called?"

"Katastroma," Lucy answered without hesitation.

"You see. You know these things without knowing them. So I have to assume that you really do have subconscious access to some external source of information which might well be Quatermain's cosmic databank."

"You obviously know all about the trireme. How do you know I'm not just reading it out of your mind? After all I am a very strong telepath, as you well know." Lucy looked at him defiantly.

John looked alarmed. "Are you reading my mind?" he said.

"No, actually," Lucy smiled and relaxed a little, "not consciously. But...who knows what my subconscious mind is doing."

"That is an added complication. Your mother did that to me with the piano. But she was doing it consciously. We'll have to factor that in to our experiments. So, this is what we will do. Complete your calculations

on the neutron star problem. Then we'll start to look for possible energy fields which might act as a cosmic database. Dark Matter, Dark Energy. The things you were supposed to be working on anyway. I think you should look into David Bohm again, the implicate order argument and Garrett Lisi. Since the Hadron Collider found the particles he predicted his unification theory has become much more credible. Just go over the current literature on the subject. And then....."

"And then you want me to screw Mike Throckmorton and see what happens?" Lucy pulled a face, "I've never screwed a man I didn't want to screw. I'm not sure that I can do it."

"You can do it because Imogen has done it."

"Why don't you ask Imogen then?"

"Because you know as well as I do that he didn't go anywhere with Imogen."

"That's very true. They just fucked each other silly. Imogen's like that. She let me feel it all just to tease me. I have to admit, Mike Throckmorton certainly knows how to fuck," she chuckled to herself, recalling the images of intense and violent eroticism which Imogen had shared with her.

John Pendle sighed, leaned forward and took both of Lucy's hands in his.

"Lucy," he said quietly, "I do love you. But it's your mind that I love." Tears welled up in his pale blue eyes, "not the sex, especially the group sex. I can't get my head round this mental sharing of sex. I don't want to share you. I can't abide the idea that when I make love to you someone else is vicariously enjoying it with you. I really don't think that our relationship has much future if this is the way it's going to be. You belong with Imogen. And Imogen belongs with Mike Throckmorton and so do you. And God still stands between us."

Lucy nodded and looked downcast, reluctantly acknowledging a truth which had already invaded her heart.

"Lucy, try to understand. This dilemma is tearing me apart. I love you for your mind, but it seems I can't have your mind without accepting your promiscuity. I can't do that. But the rational part of me is fascinated by your paranormal abilities. They must be investigated scientifically and it seems that sex is the key to understanding where your minds go. Therefore you must make love to Mike Throckmorton. But if you make love to Mike Throckmorton you will not come back to me. Nor will I want you to."

"But it would just be sex," Lucy wailed, "it doesn't mean that I don't love you any more. It doesn't mean anything."

"For me it does," John groaned in despair, "I can't cut it."

“But you still want to ask these questions?” Lucy wept.

“Yes, because only by asking these questions can I bring myself closer to my God. I need to know. And that is tearing me apart too because the truth may not be the truth I want to hear,” he paused, “so, let’s be good friends who love each other for our minds, not our bodies. Can we agree on that?”

“Nikos!” Lucy whispered, “Nikos, I’m coming.” Her beautiful face crumpled. An instant of blind rage and human despair gripped her heart. The books flew out of John Pendle’s bookcases and hurled themselves around the room in a vortex of shredded paper, like a flock of white doves startled by a gunshot.

“Nikos,” she screamed, “you can’t die!”

“Lucy,” John Pendle gasped in astonishment, “what have you done?”

Lucy put her hands to the side of her head and screamed again, then, to John’s utter astonishment, she vanished, like a genie in a puff of smoke leaving her empty clothes momentarily hanging in space. An instant later she returned, ashen faced, naked, and gasping for breath.

“Lucy,” John whispered in a choked voice, “that’s the second time you’ve done that. It defies all the known laws of physics. We have to get to the bottom of this. You have to sleep with Mike Throckmorton.”

Lucy collapsed into the one armchair allocated to all staff offices. She looked up at the baffled physicist. “I think so,” she sobbed.

CHAPTER 20

Imogen stood beside her brother's bed and took his hand in hers. She turned and looked at her mother who smiled at her encouragingly. Nikos was not getting better. Nikos was dying. There was a drip in his arm and bandages between his legs where he had been burned. His handsome but slightly effeminate face, more like his mother and his sister than his father, was drawn and expressionless. His eyes closed. His mouth half open. It was the face of someone who had already decided to die. She looked at Yesha standing on the other side of the bed holding Nikos's other hand. Yesha also smiled, that alluring Mona Lisa smile which was her speciality. Physically Yesha was fully recovered, but the trauma of what had happened to her, and to Nikos, continued to pursue her and would not be laid to rest until Nikos either died or recovered. Nevertheless so long as she could smile there would still be hope.

Yesha and Imogen held out their free hands to the others, Amethyst, Marcus and Sophie, Drew and Sonja so that they formed a rough circle around the bed. When the circle was complete that familiar energy flowed between them and once again they became one consciousness lending their collective strength to Imogen's imminent voyage into the unknown. The whiteness of death enveloped Imogen. Cold and empty.

"Nikos," her mind called out to him, *"Nikos, where are you?"*

There was no response. Imogen allowed her consciousness to flow out of her until most of what she was had left the quiet bedroom in the quiet Greek house. Here, in the familiar emptiness of the foothills of death, she stretched out into a vast gossamer web trawling through time for a lost soul. Yesha joined her and the two minds meshed into one. The others followed less confidently behind them. Imogen began to frame images of her brother's life, of his childhood and adolescence, of his time as an undergraduate, of Yesha, and sex, and the wild parties at the Hanover Terrace house. Little by little their minds engaged with that eternal palimpsest of remembered lives embossed on an energy which existed outside time. The universe imploded, drawing them inexorably into the centre of a ball of darkness studded with an infinity of tiny bright pinprick lights, each light the window into a life.

In the remote edges of her expanding consciousness Imogen at last sensed the presence of Nikos. She allowed herself to fall towards one of the pinprick lights, pulling Yesha's mind with her. They slipped though the pinprick back into the room which was the room in which the body of Nikos was now dying. She could see herself through her mother's eyes. She was still standing beside the bed. Amethyst beside

her, her face streaked with tears. Drew Quatermain, grim faced, Sonja, also in tears, Marcus and Sophie, and Yesha, eyes closed, as serene and beautiful as a dark angel. Nikos was floating above his own body. Looking down on it, and those around it.

"Nikos," she thought at the ephemeral body floating like a shimmering mist against the ceiling. "Nikos, come back to us. Nikos we love you. Please come back. Yesha wants you to come back."

Nikos opened his mind to reveal a naked child huddled in abject terror in the corner of a prison cell, its fist clenched, its mouth open, teeth gritted in a rictus of abject despair, and between its legs a smouldering black hole where its life should have been.

"I can't come back. I can't come back not like this. What will Yesha think."

"I love you Nikos," Yesha's own thought flowed into the terrified soul of her husband, "I love you so much. We all love you. Amethyst loves you. Your parents, Lucy, Imogen, Caroline, Drew, we all love you. Your children will love you. There will be children. I promise you. Please come back. Please."

"I want Lucy," Nikos wailed, "I want to talk to Lucy."

Imogen felt another force surge into her consciousness, augmenting Yesha, and behind it a new and unfamiliar energy which overwhelmed all of them.

"I'm here too Nikos. I'm here."

"Help me Lucy. You know how to help me. Help me Lucy." Nikos's voice had become childlike, as though he was escaping to some happy past in a world which was not ruled by men with guns and blowtorches. Lucy had suddenly appeared in the circle and was standing naked between Imogen and Amethyst, her face white with terror at what she had just done.

"Lucy?" Imogen thought, "where did you come from? How did you get here?"

"I don't know. I just wished it. I can feel Nikos dying. Nikos is not going to die. I won't let him."

Imogen sensed the kaleidoscope pattern of tiny white lights which was Nikos's soul reform themselves into a new pattern and change colour with the irrational precision of a vivid dream.

"Listen to me Nikos. Listen to me." Lucy's thoughts echoed round the circle. *"Nikos. It's me. It's Lucy. Listen to me. Nikos listen. Remember when we were teenagers. At puberty, when we first became aware of what we could do with our bodies. Remember how we used to float above our beds. Just like this. Remember. What else did we do Nikos, with our beautiful bodies?"*

"We changed them. We made them different. You and Imogen. You used to make your boobs bigger, and smaller, and change the colour of your nipples, and your hair and things like that. And I used to make my ears big and pointed and hairy like a dog, and I could grow a tail, and wag it."

"And you used to do things to your willy. To impress us. Made it impossibly big or ridiculously small. That was fun, wasn't it. Do you remember how you did that?"

"We forgot, didn't we. When we grew up."

"Yes, but you can remember. And if you can remember you can show us how to remember too. Remember Nikos. Listen to me. You can repair yourself. You need to hold the pattern of your DNA in your head. Understand what does what. Then you'll have to go back into the memory of your earlier life, and recover the image of the genome you had before they did this to you and make it work for you. You know how to do this. You just have to remember. And help us to remember. Use your imagination. Imagination makes us what we are, and what we can be. Nikos!"

"Will I die?"

"Perhaps."

Sophie gasped with horror. Nikos had gone completely limp. His eyes opened and turned upwards. Then the light went out in them. There was a momentary shudder, a gasp for breath, and Nikos died. His essence vanished into eternity, then the tendrils of superluminary light that were his immortal soul reappeared and funnelled back into his body which rippled like sand on a wind blown beach as each cell rebuilt itself and returned Nikos to the physical state he had enjoyed before he had met Wayne Kraitmann.

Yesha let go of Imogen's hand and collapsed onto the bed beside her husband, followed very quickly by Amethyst. Imogen knelt down beside the bed and appeared to pray, then burst into tears.

"What happened?" Sophie whispered, folding her hand into the hand of Marcus and looking in awe at her rejuvenated son, lying silent and naked on the bed between Amethyst and Yesha. The Greek doctor carefully removed the bandages from the sleeping body and revealed Nikos in all his masculine beauty. All signs of the burnt flesh had disappeared. Nikos had repaired himself.

"I didn't know we could do that," Marcus said quietly, "I know you girls can do things with your skin and hair and things. But that is extraordinary." He looked around the room. "Where's Lucy gone?" he said, "I could swear Lucy was here. Did anyone else see her? Imogen?"

Imogen nodded, brushing back tears of joy. "She was here. But not

now. Lucy also has a new gift. Lucy has learned how to teleport.”

Sophie sat down on the bed beside the head of the unconscious Nikos and stroked his hair. “Nikos,” she murmured, “my beautiful son.” She looked at Yesha and Amethyst, curled up on either side of Nikos, their tear stained faces pressed against his chest. Nikos opened his eyes and sighed.

“Mummy,” he murmured, “mummy. Yesha, Amy, Imogen. I love you. I love you so much.” He squeezed her hand then folded Yesha and Amethyst into his arms. A blanket of love enveloped him. He sighed again and went back to sleep. Sophie burst into tears of joy.

Drew Quatermain stood back from the weeping women, “There was a time,” he said, “when common people would have called this a miracle, and worshipped the ones who did it. It is a miracle. But it is explicable. When they feel up to it I’d like to know what actually happened. We’re evolving too quickly. Whatever it was that changed us three years ago has speeded up. Something new is happening. And Altair must be back online.....I can feel it.” His voice trailed away to a whisper. He put his arm around Sonja and hugged her to him. Sonja kissed him.

“Anyway,” Drew recovered his customary optimism, “Nikos is going to get better. We have learned something very special. Death can be defeated. And Lucy was here. Lucy has shown us something new. I expected her to travel back in time. I did not expect her to teleport. There is only one of us who knows how to teleport and she is not here.” He knelt down beside Imogen and held Yesha’s hand. She smiled at him. Everything was going to be alright.

“So,” Drew continued, “now we can start to make plans again. For Christmas at Croxton Hall. I promised Lucy we’d all be there together. And we shall be.” He looked out at the rain squalls whipping across the bay between the house on the hill and the great yacht anchored below it, “together,” he murmured, “I promise.”

It was still raining, two days later, when a reluctant threesome met to conduct a scientific expedition into the unknown. Lucy had said nothing more to John about her ability to vanish into thin air, for which she herself had no form of explanation, either rational or irrational, and the phenomenon had not been repeated. John was desperately keen to get to grips with this abrogation of conventional physics and desperately terrified of the means by which it would be investigated. Mike, of course, was well up for any excuse to screw Lucy and Lucy had reluctantly accepted the necessity for something which went against her

instincts. All three of them passionately wanted a rational explanation for an irrational mystery and were prepared to go to any lengths to explore it objectively.

"How are we going to do this?" Mike sat on the edge of the single bed in the bedroom of the Warden's house at the Hawthornes. John Pendle looked nonplussed.

"I just want you two to make love to each other and tell me where you go to, if anywhere. I especially want to know whether you are a passive observer in the mind of your host, or whether you can communicate with the host in any way."

The toilet flushed in the ensuite bathroom. After a moment's delay Lucy came back into the bedroom. Mike had rather looked forward to undressing her, but apparently he wasn't going to be allowed that pleasure. Lucy was already undressed. Mike stood up and kicked off his loafers. What should have been a pleasure was beginning to seem like an ordeal. He remembered Imogen's soft and yielding flesh and compared it with the long legged bronze skinned beauty who was already lying on the bed with her legs open and her knees slightly raised, thinking, no doubt, of England. There was no expression of expectation or pleasure on her face, which was solemn to the point of being sullen. Lucy lifted herself up and rested on her elbow, watching Mike undress, which didn't take him long. Imogen had been right. He had the body of a Greek god. Fit as flea, powerfully athletic, with broad shoulders, six pack slim, a tightly rounded little bottom, and an impressive dick which was already in active mode. Under normal circumstances she would have hurled herself at such a body, especially when it shared psychic powers comparable with her own.

"Are you going to get your kit off too?" Lucy said, looking at John. He looked even more nonplussed. "Well," Lucy continued, "you wanted this, so you might as well enjoy it."

John shook his head, "I'll just watch," he said.

"No you won't," Lucy snapped, "you're more likely to see what you want to see if you are in intimate physical contact with me. Get your clothes off."

John obeyed. In this context it all seemed detached and unemotional. He wondered if this was what it was like to go with a prostitute. Mike and Lucy were both looking at him. Mike was so big. How could he compete with that. Reluctantly he undressed and was surprised to find that he too was *homo erectus*. Lucy had rolled over and was on all fours across the narrow bed in what is familiarly known as the doggy position. Mike knew at once what was expected of him. He stood behind Lucy and admired the tiny bottom, slender waist and endless

legs, slightly splayed so that her already wet and hairless labia was open to him. He put his hands on her hips and pulled her gently onto him. Lucy looked up at John Pendle and grimaced. He did not know what to do.

"I can't do this," John said, aghast at the clinical impersonality of what was happening.

"Just do it," Mike snapped, also put off his stroke by Lucy's apparent coldness. John Pendle edged forward until he was facing Lucy and tentatively offered himself to her. Lucy grasped him with one hand and pulled his penis into her mouth, skewering herself between the two men. John gasped. The physical sensation of entering Lucy was already familiar to him but the psychic shock which he had come to expect was enormously enhanced. Caroline Hannay had been right. Mike Throckmorton was strong in every possible sense. Lucy was angry and impatient and was controlling both of them so that they all came quickly and simultaneously. Each thrust Mike made pushed Lucy's mouth over John. At first he tried to pull away, then he held himself steady and allowed himself to slide almost into her throat. The sensation was mind blowing. In the instant before he orgasmed John looked up at Mike Throckmorton. His face was distorted as though in pain, his head thrown back, his mouth was open and he was groaning with pleasure.

Then all three of them froze in time as their souls left their bodies, stripping them of their carnal senses and plunging them into that brilliant white darkness in which the normal laws of physics were abandoned. Something that was Mike Throckmorton wove itself into his consciousness bringing Lucy with him. Then the single united consciousness fell towards a ball of fire suspended in the blinding whiteness of space. As they fell into the sun, space and time twisted and imploded. Seeing without eyes, hearing without ears, tasting without taste, feeling without touch. John Pendle sensed the interior of the universe invade his brain. They were inside a tiny black sphere of infinite size studded with myriads of bright white stars. Throckmorton was in control now, or seemed to be. They were falling purposively towards one of the stars and through it into a cosmic elevator which hurled them into another present.

John's physical senses returned. He opened his eyes. He was sitting cross legged in a circle. He could sense Mike and Lucy, but he could also sense another mind. A mind of absolute serenity which sang to him with the most sublime music he had ever heard. The mind was aware of him, but did not question his intrusion into its consciousness. On the contrary, it welcomed him.

He looked up at the stars, his first point of reference. The night sky

was crystal clear, clearer than anything he had ever seen through the polluted atmosphere of his own earth. But the familiar stars and constellations were not where they should have been, though the reassuring moon hung full and huge just above the distant horizon. He had always been good at recognising the night sky and orientating himself in it according to the seasons of the year. He was, after all, an astronomer and an astrophysicist. This sky was different. Like most dedicated scientists, including, surprisingly, Mike Throckmorton, he was able to hold much of the complex learning of his academic discipline in his head and carry it with him.

"Where are we?" Something asked in his head. Either Mike or Lucy. But he couldn't tell which. *"I don't know. Not twenty first century Europe anyway. I've never seen the sky like this. So many stars. So clear. No pollution. Look at the Milky Way. I've never seen it so clear."*

The bodies they were occupying were in a circle of nine, six female and three males. The male whose mind he had entered was also making love to a female who nestled in his lap, her tiny feet braced behind his back, her own back arched, leaning backwards to join the other three females who formed the remaining spokes of the wheel. Their heads lay together, their hands clasped to form an inner circle, their eyes closed, their mouths open in ecstasy, their hearts stopped, neither dead nor alive, frozen in the same timeless orgasm which gripped the bodies left behind at the Hawthornes.

Mike recognised this from his own experience. The Square of Three, the familiar wheel of psychic lust, the sinuous naked bodies shimmering in the silver brightness of the moon. The females were Imogen. John gasped. The consciousness of the three explorers diffused itself around the circle, joining the one mind. He could feel everything that his hosts felt, see everything that his hosts saw. The other members of the circle were small, fine featured beautiful creatures, delicate as elves. Behind them, in another outer circle stood taller sturdier beings of whom the males were recognisably Neanderthal, though not as crude as modern reconstructions had painted them. The females were less obviously Neanderthal and more like the beautiful creatures who made up the inner circle. All were naked, except that some of the women in both circles wore bracelets and necklaces of bone and shell and what looked like carved antler. The woman in his lap wore a complex necklace made up of patterns of different shells, interspersed with animal teeth and pieces of antler carved with intricate labyrinthine swirls and lightning strike zigzags. Bracelets of the same materials and styles adorned her wrists and the ankles locked behind him.

The two circles were sitting in an open area in what appeared to be

an empty wilderness, though the shapes of trees could be seen in the distance, and behind the circle was a limestone cliff at the base of which were the entrances to many caves. There was a broad waterfall too, and a large deep pool gouged out at the base of the cave pocked cliff. The dream resonated in Lucy's memory. She listened, fascinated by the interplay of thoughts between the one mind of the inner circle and the many Neanderthals at the edges.

"We have given our bodies to the Great Spirit and the Great Spirit has come to us."

Lucy sensed the awe and delight which flowed around the Circle.

"We are not Gods," Lucy thought in response. The mind she temporarily shared responded, first with shock, and then with gratitude.

"The Great Spirit speaks to us," it responded, relaying the image of the message to all the listening minds.

"Who are you?" John struggled to articulate words into thoughts.

"We are the people of the place. I am their..." the image which came into John's mind was of a mind which spoke to God, a shaman, a priest.

"And who are they?" Mike framed an image of the creatures in the outer circle.

"They are the people of the place. Like us."

"Do you know who we are?"

"You are the emissaries of the Great Spirit. You have come to us often in our dreams. Have you come to join with us? You are welcome to be with us and to share our mind. We are so few."

John struggled to make sense of this. It was not one mind which was speaking but many minds speaking as one in a visual language that transcended words. A language of images and symbols, emotions and sensations. A language of maths and music and art. A language of sublime and unconditional love.

"What is the Great Spirit?" Lucy asked. There was a long delay before an answer formed in her mind.

"The Great Spirit is our ancestors. You are the Great Spirit."

"You worship the Great Spirit?" More delay as the host mind struggled to visualise the concept of worship then gave up the struggle. The image which came back to Lucy was one of incomprehension. The concept of worship did not exist in this society.

"You are the Others?" Mike Throckmorton asked, struggling, like John, to articulate his weak telepathy. Then, before he sensed an answer Lucy's consciousness left him. Mike began to panic. The woman impaled on the stiff flesh of his host came out of her orgasmic trance, opened her eyes and looked directly at him. The eyes changed from

subtle darkness to the blue grey of Lucy's eyes, the hair changed from raven black to shining blonde. The face became the face of Lucy. Lucy materialised in her sister's place. There was a mental and audible gasp of awe and astonishment from the others in the two circles. The Great Spirit had made itself manifest in the flesh. The universe had become woman.

"The Others?" she replied interrogatively, *"what are the Others? We are the people of this place."*

"Lucy?" Mike demanded.

"Lucy?" she replied, *"yes Lucy. Lucy is here. I am Lucy."* The thoughts which flowed from her were puzzled, as though she too did not fully understand what was happening to her. *"Lucy."* The thought of Lucy rolled over and over in the female host's brain, *"Lucinda. What is Lucinda? A name? What is a name? So many things in your heart. What kind of world is this? So cruel. So...."* another image of death and violence and decay. *"They are there. In your world. Those creatures without pity. Those naked apes who kill all creatures for pleasure. We have met them. They have killed so many of us. They rule your world. How can that be so?"*

Lucy looked up at the face of the male host who had entered her. It was beautiful, angelic, and the core and essence of its consciousness was familiar. It was the consciousness she had dreamed of on Skaithos. And someone else. Something else.

"We have to go," Lucy came back into Mike's brain with unexpected urgency, *"we have to go. Now!"*

Before the curious professor Pendle could object his consciousness was yanked out of the hosts and hurled back into the bedroom in the Hawthornes. All three bodies collapsed in a breathless heap.

"Well," said Lucy, rinsing the remnants of John Pendle out of her mouth with the Scotch which they continued to drink for its flavour, even if the alcohol no longer had any effect on them, "did you find out what you wanted to find out?"

Pendle sipped at his own Scotch and tried to make sense of what had happened. The American Greek god lay on his back on the floor looking, as he so often did, at the state of his dick. "Amazing," he muttered, "goddam amazing."

"Not really," John Pendle replied, "I really have no idea what happened. I still don't know whether it was real, or just a collective dream."

"It was real," Mike said.

"How can we be sure? Everything we saw could have come out of

our memories and experiences. I've never seen the Square of Three. But we've all read about in *Scholars and Gentlemen*, and Mike has actually done it. Have you ever done it, Lucy?"

Lucy shook her head. "No, but Imogen took part in the circle with Mike. I know about it from her."

"The stars were different," John said resignedly, "but that too could have come out of my memory. I have seen star charts projected into the remote past. I can remember the key constellations. I'll check it out when I can get to a computer." He had another sip at the whisky and shivered. He was beginning to feel cold, though whether it was from shock or defective central heating he could not tell. The other two did not seem to be bothered by it. He pulled a blanket off the bed and draped it over his shoulders. "Why did you pull us out?" he asked in a peeved voice which bordered on an accusation.

Lucy shrugged, "because we are able to communicate with them. We can even merge with them. You saw what happened. She became me. These creatures who are our ancestors were telepaths like us. Only much stronger. If we communicate with them we can change them. I could have changed the past and if so I may also have changed the future. Our future. I thought it wiser to get out."

"That is a more serious problem," Mike said, "if what I read in *Scholars and Gentlemen* is true your 'family' has the ability to change individual genomes by what amounts to an act of will. That's why your telepathy is so strong and also your longevity. Something modified you, and me, when your demon mother shagged me. And that modification could in principle be transmitted into the past. You could change their genetic profile. By thought alone. It need not even be a conscious act."

Mike scratched his balls and looked again at his dick. "On the other hand," he added, "Sinclair's view was that your psychic skills and longevity were already inherent in your genes. They were merely dormant. Something woke them up. At first I didn't believe any of this was possible. It certainly defies the laws of known physics, but it can be more easily reconciled with genetics. Those creatures were certainly telepaths and they had no concept of natural death, so I suspect that they already had virtual immortality. If so it is entirely possible that you, we, are descended from them. Terry was right. We are not human. But they were not immune to violent death. The humans wiped them out. I saw it happen, in that earlier dream, with your mother. They killed the males."

"But not the females," Lucy said, "we know that some of the females survived by interbreeding with the humans. Their gene pool was compromised by human DNA. But they survived. You're right. We are

their descendants. Part human, part Neanderthal, part whatever they were. And that's why we've had to rediscover ourselves."

"Why did they kill the males?" John Pendle asked.

"Because they wanted the females for themselves," Mike said, remembering his conversation with Terry, "or perhaps they thought that by killing the males they would wipe out the species." Mike paused to consider the implications of this argument, "or maybe they thought the males were dangerous. So they killed them on sight."

"How do you know all of this?" John Pendle asked.

"We saw it all, in her mind, in the mind of all of them," Lucy replied, "and like us they can't kill without sacrificing their own lives. That why it was so easy for humans to destroy them. They repay love with death. But the ones we've just visited don't seem to know much about humans. So we must have gone further back in time than you did with my mother."

"Yes," Mike frowned, "I thought that too. It was not the same place, and not the same female I met in the last dream. So, we've learned something. How far we go back may depend on who our partner is. Apparently you can go further back than your mother." Mike paused to digest that thought. "Did you find out where they came from?"

"Well," Lucy hesitated, "we learned what you wanted us to learn. It seems that we can communicate with them. And no, they don't know where they came from. Only that they were there before any of the other sapient hominids. They remembered the first meeting with the Neanderthals, which means they were around at least three hundred thousand years BP, which is when Neanderthals first appeared in Europe. And humans have only just arrived on the scene and already they are killing pretty well anything they meet, which means we have moved forward in time to around forty thousand BC. But the Neanderthals themselves were descended from hominids who go back at least six hundred thousand years."

"And the rest," Mike said, "there must have been another branch in the phylogenetic cladogram. You know that Terry Gardner thinks that we're descended from Bonobos. He thinks we're a different species and much older than *homo sapiens*. Millions of years older."

"I didn't know that," Lucy rolled over onto her front and rested her chin on her hands, "what are Bonobos?"

"Another species of chimpanzee," Mike replied, "not the common or garden chimps we see in zoos. More graceful. Tree walkers. Tropical forest chimps who walk on two legs. But very rare. Apparently our DNA is closer to the Bonobos than to the common chimp. And they're highly promiscuous. Just like us. A considerable part of their social

organisation revolves around sex. Most forms of human sexual activity can be found in Bonobos, including bisexuality, and all the other forms of sexual intercourse. The females even offer sex as a gift for good behaviour and as form of greeting. And it is the females who bond sexually and dominate the males. In that respect they are different to *homo sapiens*."

"Sounds very familiar," Lucy murmured. Then she remembered for the first time another dream. A dream within a dream. "When I was on Skiathos," she said, "I had the weirdest of weird dreams. It was like the one we just shared, except I think it was much, much further back in time. There were hominids butchering a rhino, but not Neanderthals, bigger than Neanderthals and more simian."

"*Like this*," Mike flashed an image into Lucy's mind. "*Homo ergaster*," he said in words for John's benefit. "Most recent date is five hundred thousand years BP at Boxgrove in Sussex. But they go back at least two million years."

"Yes," Lucy replied, "that's what they looked like. And there were other creatures just like the creatures we saw in the dream we just had. Human, or humanoid. Beautiful dark creatures who played a game with a sabre toothed tiger, like the Minoan Bull Dancers, but they could wait until the last instant before the tiger pounced and I don't know how to explain this. They could disappear and reappear somewhere else. I suppose we would call it teleporting. And in the dream I did it too. But it was terrifying. You had to believe you were about to die for it to work."

John Pendle looked up, his insatiable curiosity whetted, "well," he said, "you have also done that in real life. The question is how did you do it?" he asked, "what did you do?"

Lucy looked nonplussed, "I don't know. Twice Nikos was on the point of death. But he had enormous energy and his dying energy gave me the power to jump to him. I just imagined that my body would be with him. And it just happened. And that must be what happened on Skiathos. I was about to drown and, somehow, I teleported myself out of the sea."

John Pendle shook his head in disbelief. Nothing made any sense to him. "It looks as though this ability to teleport is something else that you have rediscovered. Like the telepathy. These ancient creatures knew how to do it and you've just remembered. Sex and death. The two most powerful events in life."

"I wonder if this is what Drew meant," Lucy whispered, almost to herself, "new powers. How did he know?"

"And another thing," Mike mused, "if she could take the shape of

your body she must have been able to somehow read your DNA and incorporate it into her own. None of this is possible in the current state of biological knowledge. To become a shape shifter would require a conscious control of the molecular structure of your body. That's Star Trek stuff."

"It certainly defies the laws of physics." John Pendle muttered angrily.

"Perhaps," Lucy replied, "but it doesn't defy the imagination. If we can conceive of it in our imagination maybe we can make it happen. It is imagination that makes us what we are. And she didn't take my body. I took hers."

"Imagination makes us what we are? I remember that," Mike said, "that was in *Scholars and Gentlemen* too. Drew wrote it as dedication in a book he gave to Sophie." He looked speculatively at his nascent dick, then at Lucy who had also noticed the signs of arousal, "wanna try again babe? In the interests of science?"

Lucy smiled, "why not? Only this time I'm going on top. Where I belong."

"And I'm going back to the sodding laboratory," John Pendle said sadly, recognising a divine inevitability in what was happening, "you two can fuck yourselves silly. I'm going to do some serious physics." He dressed himself as quickly as he could and left them to it. But nothing happened. They did not regress to the remote past but succumbed instead to the passionate present. Afterwards Mike lay beside a sleeping Lucy and gently stroked her face. The tenderness that he had learned from Imogen overwhelmed him. Tears of joy sprang in his newly opened eyes. He recognised that for the first time in his life he was in love, not with one, but with two women who were really just two sides of the same divine woman. He would die for them, if he had to.

CHAPTER 21

In the two weeks which followed Lucy tried to avoid John Pendle. But she was obliged to go into the astrophysics department from time to time and when she did run into him Professor Pendle was polite but aloof, so, to avoid further embarrassment for him, Lucy set up a feed to the Astrophysics department computer and worked from the seclusion of her flat in Lindsay Court. She spent a lot of time with Mike and with his consent she occasionally invited Imogen to share in their lovemaking. Physically Imogen was still on Alonissos but her consciousness was an enthusiastic, if vicarious, participant in what Mike had come to call psi sex and he soon discovered that Lucy could now flit between being her athletically lewd self and being the softly yielding Imogen. Together they were insatiable and together all three of them made more transitory visits to that other circle to try to complete the observations which had been denied to Professor Pendle.

The more often they went back the more familiar they became with the culture and habits of their remote ancestors and the more they learned about an intangible world of art and intellect which was hundreds of thousands of years old when it had first met humans, and then died at their hands. They also learned that these remote ancestors no longer knew how to teleport. The concept seemed alien to them. Either they had never had this skill, or they had forgotten how to do it over the millennia, or Lucy's dream of an even more remote past had been just that, a dream. They had learned instead how to calm dangerous wild animals by entering their minds and talking to them. This did not, however, work for the most dangerous of the wild animals they encountered. Humans, it seemed, reacted with extreme violence to any attempt to communicate with them telepathically and killed both Neanderthals and Others on sight.

The presence of early humans confirmed Mike's belief that they had gone back at least forty thousand years to a period when the first humans had just begun to explore the North, but long after *homo ergaster* and the later Neanderthals had colonised interglacial Europe. And they were definitely not in the same place or time that Mike has first visited with Caroline. These creatures lived in a colder environment, on an open and sparsely wooded savannah which provided intensive grazing for woolly mammoths, bison and reindeer. Meat was plentiful but the winters were so cold that the Others and their Neanderthal follows routinely migrated to the warm South in the winter; to the sea and the sun and the lethal attentions of the humans.

The modern parallels were also inescapable and the modern parallels were catching up on them fast. On the first of December there was a coup in Pakistan which replaced the military government with a holy alliance between the mullahs and the former intelligence services. Its first diplomatic action was to place its nuclear arsenal at the disposal of Allah. For the first time the decadent West began to contemplate the possibility that its world hegemony was coming to an end. Consumer society blinked, opened another bag of popcorn, and switched over to watch repeats of *Desperate Housewives*.

Ormen Lange sat back in the comfortable leather chair and looked at the high level brass gathered round the table in the Chimera conference room. There were far fewer than usual and no civilians or politicians. The decisions they had made were not for the ears of the foolish. The proceedings were about to wound up..

"So," said General Jupitus, the acting chairman in the absence of the President or his nominees, "let's summarise. We expect Pakistan to attack India within the next month. Probably around Christmas. The campaign will begin with terrorist attacks against Indian Kashmir but will quickly escalate into a full scale war. The Government in Islamabad will launch a nuclear attack against Delphi and Bombay. The Indians will reply in kind. They will publicly receive any assistance we can offer, including tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. We are all clear on what is expected here. Pakistan and Afghanistan will be taken out permanently. In retaliation the Iranians will launch a nuclear missile at America which will be detected by us and neutralised. It will be construed as an act of war. The president will be obliged to put aside his scruples. Our response will be to terminate the Iranian problem once and for all. That's it on this matter. We await events and hope that the Chinese and Russian don't take sides. And I don't need to tell you that total secrecy must prevail. No one outside this room must know what was decided here today." The General looked down at his papers, "now Ormen you have a matter you wish to raise under AOB."

Ormen Lange leaned forward, "as you know we've been monitoring the activities of the industrialist Drew Quatermain."

A groan went round the table. They had heard this all before.

"We believe that he has the capability to provide us with racially targetable biogenetic weapons which we can use against the Arabs," Lange's voice was harsh, "I want your permission to acquire this asset before anyone else does."

"It's too late for biogenetic weapons," Jupitus replied, "these guys have got nukes and they aren't afraid to use them. Biogenetic weapons

take time to kill and during that time they will hit us with their nukes. It's too late."

"You assholes may not want to believe it but Quatermain is a serious threat," Lange said quietly, "we also believe he may himself be preparing to release some kind of biogenetic weapon against us. He's building refuges for his people in underwater hotels. That's what he calls them anyway. In the last three weeks large numbers of key Trikos personnel have transferred to an underwater site off Iceland. He has some kind of laboratory there. He's going to take advantage of the present chaos to let out some kind of Domesday bug. Hide out until it's done and then come out and finish us off."

"This is ridiculous," Admiral Driscoll snapped, "Quatermain is just an entrepreneur. He's no threat to anyone."

"I've seen Ormen's files on Quatermain," Jupitus replied, "if looked at from the point of view of a Hollywood scriptwriter his activities might indeed be interpreted as threatening. I myself find it hard to believe that he is any kind of threat. He has no military forces. No weapons. No record of violence or involvement in politics. Not our kind of politics anyway. Indeed the whole history of his company has been one of service to humanity. He's a limey liberal. No threat to us."

"He's a fucking recluse who is fucking insane," Lange insisted, "he thinks he and his family are some kind of telepathic aliens. He thinks humans are an inferior species. I tell you guys; he's a threat. You'd better believe it. He has the technology to create biogenetic weapons which can be racially targeted. He could use them against us. He could be working with the fucking Iranians. He had an Iranian wife. And he's not an American!! And apart from that he's a fucking tall poppy. He needs cutting down to size."

"His Iranian wife died more than twenty years ago," Admiral Driscoll sneered, "you're the one who is insane."

General Jupitus looked at his watch. "I'm sorry gentlemen," he said, "We have to wind this up. You all know what your assigned roles are. Resume your commands and await events. There will be no further meetings until this is over."

"What about fucking Quatermain?" Lange insisted, "I need a mandate for executive action."

Jupitus cradled his head in his hands. "I don't want to hear any more about Quatermain," he muttered in an exasperated voice, "if you want to fuck him, then go fuck him. But bring back the goods and don't dump on us again. Is there any other business?" he added.

Ormen Lange sat back in the comfortable chair, his gaunt face suffused with an enigmatic smile.

Admiral Driscoll put up his hand. Jupiter nodded at him.

"What about this NASA report?" he asked, "if it's true this is a bigger threat to us than anything militant Islam has to offer. The science guys are talking about an extinction event."

"We are aware of it," Jupiter replied, "but NASA can't provide any evidence of a date or even a probable date. My understanding is they don't expect it for several hundred years. By then we should have figured out how to deal with it. They're monitoring it but at the moment the calculations required to make an accurate prediction are way beyond the capabilities of our fastest computers. So, it is not a clear and present danger. Not yet. Okay. Thank you gentlemen. We'll meet again. When the hurley burley's done." Jupiter laughed.

Lucy's struggle with her conscience was eventually resolved when she received an e-mail from Trikos with an access link to the new computer promised to her by Drew Quatermain. Her first encounter with the computer was revelatory. She logged on to the desktop PC in her tutor's flat with her usual local network password, typed in the Trikos URL and waited to be invited to log on to the remote mainframe. This computer, however, operated with different protocols. The screen cleared, then displayed the familiar Trikos isometric triangle. There was no immediate invitation to log on. Instead the computer spoke to her, not through conventional audio speakers, but directly into her mind. She felt the familiar telepathic tingle as her consciousness engaged with a machine which was alive and sentient and recognised her instantly. The sensation took her breath away. This computer left her in no doubt that it was designed to be used by telepaths, that its powers were out of this world, and the password it allocated to her was Thanatakis, the name its awakening operating system had used when it had first spoken to her on Skiathos.

She sat back and allowed her consciousness to float in the mind of a machine which wasn't a machine at all but a pattern of sentient energy diffused throughout the universe. The same energy that had stored the memory of their lives from the beginning of life. The same immaterial place that they explored when their consciousness left their bodies. The place their souls went to when their body died. All the knowledge of the past was available to her. She had only to frame a question in her mind and the computer would find an answer for it. Everything. And there was more. The living computer not only informed her. It also empowered her. Her psychic abilities expanded almost exponentially. It was fascinating and seriously frightening. For the first time she could

visualise the elusive atom, not as a dead mathematical construct, but as an entity poised between particulate matter and the waveform energy postulated by string theory. She could also sense the unrelenting battle between Dark Energy and Gravity and understood instantly how to manipulate their mutually repulsive powers. She looked at the empty coffee mug on her desk and willed it to float, remembering the unconscious powers she and Imogen had used as children to move things around and change themselves. She thought of a witch on a broomstick and floated herself up to the ceiling, then gently back to her chair. She remembered the *ekstatic* vision which had taken her to Alonissos to save Nikos. How had she done that? Now she knew. Her body existed in two worlds, the world of matter and the world of energy and she could flit between either. Gathering all her courage she imagined herself in the courtyard of Keele Hall and invoked that empowering harmony of lyrical numbers which had been revealed to her on Skiathos. Instantly she was there, but naked, because teleportation worked on the DNA of living flesh alone. Startled passers-by had a fleeting glimpse of a naked woman who appeared before them and vanished instantly as Lucy realised what she had done.

Terrified, she switched off the PC. But the link to the Altair computer remained. It had downloaded itself into her consciousness and written itself into her promiscuous DNA. In future it would be accessible to her wherever and whenever she was. Drew Quatermain had finally realised his dream. He had created an instrument which could communicate with eternity. The waiting dead, with all their knowledge and wisdom, could come back to life. And the living dead would have the imaginary powers of witches, wizards and demi gods. She wondered if Drew had really made contact with his dead wife Yasmine. A soft and gentle voice whispered images of undying love and transcendental devotion. Yasmine was everything that Lucy had imagined she would be, and she had never left Drew. She was in the mind of Yesha, embossed into Yesha's DNA.

That was how the computer worked. DNA was not merely a template for the fabrication of human cells, it was a record of all the lives transmitted down that unique genetic tree, back to the origins of life itself and it carried encoded within it all the memories of those lives, all their consciousness, all their experiences stored in their bodies and in the cosmic conscious into which this computer now tapped. She felt her way through all the branches of her ancestors, back to that child woman, the woman of the Weshesh, being raped by an ancient Egyptian soldier, the woman from whom Sophie, Caroline, Yasmine and all who followed in that line were descended. And back beyond that through the untold

suffering of the dark aeons of relentless persecution by fearful humans, to those now familiar creatures celebrating the Square of Three in the presence of their Neanderthal cousins. Everything was there, including the merciless murder and enslavement which had come to them with the world of men and had reduced her ancestors to a mere handful of secretive souls. And back at last to the dark forgotten caves where her remotest ancestors had slept through aeons of ice to emerge like chrysallids into the warmth of each returning sun.

Then Lucy came back to earth with a bump. The computer demanded that she complete the task set for her. She had only to look at the data she had prepared for analysis and the computer would download it directly from her brain. She read through the latest batch of data from the battery of electronic devices which were now watching the dying neutron stars. Her printer whirled suddenly into unbidden life and disgorged a page of text. Lucy read through it with mounting horror. The results were instantaneous and terrifying. So terrifying that she was at last obliged to seek an audience with her erstwhile lover.

For his part John Pendle had seemed surprisingly sanguine about the end of an affair which, in truth had hardly lasted more than a month. Inside he was seething with anger and frustration. What he had said about loving Lucy's mind was true and, whilst he had enjoyed the sex, it was as nothing compared with the erotic fantasies of quantum physics into which he now threw himself with such rage and energy that he came within an ace of losing his mind. When Lucy eventually came to see him he was positively crackling with intellectual excitement but his face was drawn and haggard from too many nights without sleep and he was gabbling non stop as he scribbled endless equations onto his circular blackboard.

"I think I've cracked it," he shouted, as Lucy came into his room clutching a sheaf of papers covered with mathematical formulae, "I think I've cracked it."

Lucy was crying.

"It's okay Lucy," he said suddenly noticing her. "I'm not angry with you. It's okay. It's the right thing." Lucy continued to cry and thrust a single page of paper at him. "See," he said, taking the paper from Lucy and throwing it down on the top of his volcanic filing system, "thing is, it's been in front of me all the time. It's nothing to do with biology. It's just good old Einstein. Matter and energy. You can change your physical shape because you can somehow convert mass into energy. Your body is made up of information coded in your DNA. If you can hold that information in your mind you can transmit it through space. That must

be how it works.”

He paused, ignoring the fact that Lucy was still crying, “and I’ve cracked the other thing as well. It’s all connected. I saw it all when we went back in time but it didn’t make sense then. Now I’ve thought about it. And I’ve been having the most extraordinary dreams. It’s all to do with the arrow of time. Except that there is no arrow of time. What we see as linear time is an illusion wrought by our biological form. Our perception of the external world is moderated by our biological sensors and they can only perceive three dimensions but actually we exist in at least ten dimensions and at least one of them must be outside time for the calculation to work. We can only physically live in Bohm’s explicate order, because that’s the universe we can see. But we have no certain way of knowing what is real and what is not. It simply seems real to us. But in our brains, I mean the consciousness which is peculiar to us, we can see matter as energy. We can see the fundamental particle, the God particle, the implicate order. I can see it in my dreams, so clearly that I can touch it. The universe is like a symphony, the ultimate harmony of all harmonies. Time does not exist, or rather Einstein was right; all points in time exist at the same point in time. Time is static. When you go back to that former life, those creatures we saw in the circle, you don’t go back in time at all. They coexist within us. Bohm was right about the holonomic brain and the holographic universe. They’re the same thing. Our lives are not linear. They’re parallel. Side by side. You just move from one simultaneous sequence of life to another. Past, present, future. They’re all together. It’s the same with our DNA. It’s a hologram for all the lives we’ve ever lived. It’s all part of the same harmony. All music, sublime music. It’s so simple. Look. I’ve done some calculations Lucy look the hand of God is everywhere ... Lucy.” But Lucy had gone, leaving a small pile of clothes behind her.

John collapsed into his chair and stared at the equations on the blackboard. After a while he rummaged amongst the mound of papers strewn across his desk and retrieved the single sheet left behind by Lucy. He started to read it and his heart sank. He stood up and paced around the room, stopping from time to time to examine the complex patterns of numbers and symbols on his blackboard. Then his face crumpled into rage and tears. He went back to his desk, took out his bible and tore it into pieces page by page until he came to the book of Revelations. *And there came down fire from God out of heaven and devoured them: and the devil, who seduced them.*

“Lucy ..” John sobbed and collapsed face down amongst the mound of paper, “Lucy, this is not possible. God can’t do this.”

But God could do whatever he liked and what he did was not to the liking of General Jupitus. On the 6th of December Iran launched nuclear weapons at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, liberating the Palestinian homeland and wiping out most Palestinians in the process. The Americans responded by vaporising Teheran and Mecca. The final battle between God and Satan had been joined, only no one knew which was which, so ignorant armies girded their loins and prepared to fight by night.

CHAPTER 22

Amazingly everybody else got on with what was left of their lives. Most of the students at Keele went home to be with their parents in case the worst happened, which they would have done anyway since the autumn term was about to end. The historians remembered the Cuban missile crisis when students had written farewell letters to their loved ones in the expectation of imminent incineration. Others had simply gone off and made passionate love to anyone who was willing. This generation of students, however, turned its back on Armageddon and returned to its Playstations knowing full well that limited nuclear warfare in expendable Middle Eastern deserts was unlikely to amount to Mutually Assured Destruction for the entire human race, especially if it liberated the oil fields on which the future destruction of the human race depended.

On Christmas Eve John Pendle retreated to his bed with a full bottle of emasculated Scotch, determined not to celebrate the birth of the son of God, and there he remained, refusing to answer his incessantly ringing phone and racked with sleepless despair, until Lucinda, child of light, and Mike Throckmorton, child of darkness, materialised naked in his bedroom. Lucy bent over him and shook him. Eventually he opened his eyes and looked up at the golden body poised above him and the saturnine god standing behind her.

“Are you an angel?” he muttered.

“No, I’m not an angel,” Lucy said softly, “John, you must come back with us. We don’t have much time. I’ll show you how to do it. Kiss me. That’s all you must do.”

“I don’t love you any more. And you don’t love me. No one loves me. Not even God. God is going to kill us. All of us.”

“Don’t be silly. Kiss me and I will make you a prince.”

“Now whose being silly.”

“Kiss me,” Lucy leaned closer and placed her hands on either side of John Pendle’s face, “now, kiss me.”

The professor gave in to the sensuous dream and succumbed to the soft lips he had once so much enjoyed. He felt first the implacable lust which flowed through all of them, then something else. A sudden shift of flesh as part of Lucy was incorporated into his own DNA. Something impossible to define. Something divine. Something which could only happen in dreams. And with it came a sequence of numbers which sang to him in celestial harmonies.

The dreams of life are fleeting, Lucy’s mind whispered, *the dreams*

of death are eternal. Come and see.

"We're all going to die," John groaned, "all of us. There's nothing we can do."

"Yes," Lucy stroked his face, "we're all going to die. But we will be reborn. You have to come with us. You are one of us and we are not going to abandon you. Close your eyes and let your heart follow me."

John obeyed. When he dared to open his eyes he was sitting at the great dining table in Croxton Hall. Most of the places at the table were occupied by the people he had met at his last visit, but there were others who were new to him. He looked down at himself. As frequently happens in nightmares he was stark naked and acutely embarrassed in the company of people who were fully clothed, except for Lucy and Mike who sat on either side of him, apparently unconcerned by their own primal nudity, though Mike's expression reflected his amazement at what had just happened.

"Well done Mike and Lucy. Now we know that it is possible for you teleport other people." Drew Quatermain was sitting at the head of the table, "Professor Pendle, welcome back. Allow me to introduce you to the people you haven't met." He paused, "this is Marcus and Sophie, who you've heard of."

John looked blankly at the discreetly handsome man and the woman who looked so like Imogen that it was impossible to tell them apart.

"Excuse me," he said, panicking, "I'm naked." He looked shamefacedly at the unbelievably beautiful Sophie.

Marcus smiled, "we are often naked. Our bodies are the mirror of our souls. Nothing is concealed."

"And this is Nikos and Ayesha, who you haven't met," Drew said, "and Amethyst, their copartner."

John nodded at them, distracted by their beauty. Nikos was a mirror image of his mother. Yesha was tiny and darkly beautiful, with a delicate Indian or Middle Eastern face and jet black hair. Amethyst had a more English face but her hair was also jet black and straight and her eyes were an extraordinary complement to her name. They all smiled back at him. Angelic welcoming smiles which infiltrated his consciousness and caressed him with images of love and belonging.

"Puck you know," Drew continued, "and this is Tinkerbelle." Another small delicate woman with the same bronze gold skin and torrents of Pre-Raphaelite golden hair. She raised her hand in salutation and smiled at him.

"And there are two more still to come, before we are complete," he nodded at the two remaining empty chairs, "and as you will see, Lucy," Drew continued, "you are not the only one who can self teleport."

One of the two empty seats shimmered as though in a heat haze and was instantly occupied by a slender woman with the same long black hair, a small elfish face and penetrating blue eyes.

"And not quite last and by no means least," Drew smiled and held out his hand towards the newcomer, "this is Dr Seraphina Mandrakis who is responsible for developing the DNA and quantum computers without which we would not be on the verge of solving this mystery. Seraphina is new to all of you except Lucy. Professor Pendle, I think you should make the acquaintance of Seraphina. You have a lot in common."

The chair in which Dr. Meredith had materialised was directly opposite a totally shocked John Pendle, on the other side of the long dining table. She had the same skin colour and black hair, and the same delicate Eastern Mediterranean face as most of the other women, but her eyes were ice blue, like Caroline's and when she offered her hand to John across the table her mind invaded his with a symbolic language which was totally familiar because it was the universal language of numbers. Everything that had tortured John's soul was suddenly redeemed. Seraphina had been sent from God. Seraphina would be his salvation.

"You!" Lucy exclaimed. She sat up and stared at Seraphina accusingly.

"Yes. You remember our dream."

"I do now," Lucy retorted, "and Professor Thanatakis?"

"Yes, Professor Thanatakis."

"He said you were his daughter," Lucy protested.

"No. My father is American. I'm American." Seraphina looked puzzled as though recalling a suppressed memory. "But I was in Skiathos. And we did share a dream. That's how it works. My father was in it. And Akis and his friends. And Professor Thanatakis, who was dead. And you of course. And...the Altair computer."

"We shared the same dream?" Lucy exclaimed.

"It seems so. The people I was thinking about in my life were transposed into your dream. I was thinking about meeting Professor Thanatakis. Famous Greek anthropologist and all-round genius. And I was thinking of my father and worrying about him. The Altair computer seems to have brought you into my dream and me into yours."

"Not a coincidence then," Lucy sighed, "why were you there?"

"Just after we first tested Altair 4 it disappeared. We thought we'd lost it." Seraphina replied, "I took a break on Skiathos with Akis and his friends. I do it every year. Same place, same hotel, same beach. Then I had a message from Drew. He knew where you were. After you

trashed your phone he asked me to look out for you and give you the Altair codes. The rest you know.”

“And the dream?” Lucy persisted, “how come we shared a dream.”

“Your mind was wide open and exactly like mine. Mathematical. We were all going to have dinner with Yannis Hadjidaki’s friend Professor Thanatakis. But he died suddenly that morning. Whilst you and I were on the beach. Though not together. I was looking at you because you seemed to be having an orgasm all on your own. I sensed it. It was fantastic.” Seraphina looked towards Imogen and smiled. “Then you rushed off into the sea and I lay down beside Akis and fell asleep. Then I had the weirdest dream. You were in it and Professor Thanatakis and my friends, and then you were drowning. I could see you, underwater. It woke me up and suddenly you were back on the beach. I realised at once what had happened.”

“What had happened?” Lucy asked. The others listened attentively.

“The Altair computer had come back. It was monitoring you through my subconscious and it detected that you were about to drown and teleported you out. That is what I gave you.”

“And I was so mad about Drew’s phones spying on me,” Lucy sighed, “and all the time..... How could I do that?”

“I already knew how to teleport. The dream we shared allowed the computer to pass on that information to you. Maybe the death of Professor Thanatakis acted as a catalyst. Death seems to have a role in this. He had just died. You were about to die. Your subconscious saved you. With the help of Altair 4. The same thing happened to me. I was the first to discover it was possible. There is a sequence of musical numbers which invokes the computer. I must have given you the numbers. In the dream.”

“How?” Lucy asked, “how did you discover you could jump?”

“I was in a car crash. On my honeymoon in Crete. We came off the road, down a cliff and into the sea. My husband was killed by the impact. I was trapped in the car. I couldn’t get out. Horrible. I knew I was going to drown. And then I was outside the car, in the sea. There was no rational explanation for what happened so I worked it out from first principles, just as you did. It’s like casting a spell, but with numbers. You need the maths to understand it. That’s why you and I were the first. It came relatively easily to us.”

“But....your husband? Akis. I met your husband. And what about the book? *Scholars and Gentlemen*?” Lucy pursed her lips, already knowing the answer.

“Akis is not my husband. Akis is my brother in law. Once I knew that Altair had returned from wherever it had been I had to get back to

Iceland ASAP. So immediately after I last saw you I jumped. I guess you probably found my clothes in the corridor. And Akis found the book on the beach and posted it back to me. He understands. He is one of us. Anyway, I returned the book to Drew."

Lucy grunted with disapproval. "There was something else," she whispered, "something else. In the dream."

Drew looked up, "what Lucy?" he asked, "what else was there?"

Lucy looked puzzled, "I don't know," she whispered, "Time? Death? Something else. Sod it!" She exclaimed, "Why is there never a straight answer?"

"Don't be angry Lucy." Drew said gently, "there are greater issues here and many things we don't fully understand. The computer is a gateway to another reality which no longer speaks to us in dreams. It is the custodian of our souls."

"It's true that we've all had some very strange dreams since Altair 4 came online." Seraphina leaned back her chair, "of course we now know that Altair 4 was systematically scanning some of us and uploading itself into our DNA. It is entirely possible that it was initially using dreams to communicate." She smiled at Lucy. "As Lucy has already discovered, it can now communicate directly with our conscious minds. You have a very high psi quotient Lucy, and powerful mathematical skills. Your mind can visualise infinity. Like mine. You must have been one of the first to be assimilated. The computer looks for the strongest psychic signals first."

"Altair 4," John Pendle asked, "what is Altair 4?"

There was a long silence.

"Surely you know that, Professor Pendle," James Sinclair said, laughing, "it's the Forbidden Planet?"

Drew also laughed. "Yes," he murmured, "the Forbidden Planet. James remembers."

"The Forbidden Planet. Yes. I remember too. Why am I here?" John Pendle asked in a peevish voice, still acutely conscious of his embarrassing nakedness. Seraphina was looking at his stick thin body quizzically, a smile hovering around her lips.

"You're one of us, John," Drew continued, "and you're going to stay with us."

"Well, can I have some clothes please," John objected. The auburn haired woman sitting next to Drew, who John remembered only as Sonja, slipped out of her silk dressing gown, and handed it John. He blushed, then stood up and allowed Sonja to exchange his nakedness for hers.

"You are feeling happier now?" she asked, stroking his cheek. Her

touch was electric and once again he felt that all pervading sorcery of lust and love.

No, not witches. Not in this life. The thought came from Caroline, but it also came from all of them. John shrugged and sat down. "Why am I here?" he repeated.

"Because we need to escape. We think we know how to do it, and we're not going to leave you behind," Caroline replied.

"We've been discussing Lucy and Mike's trips into the past," Drew said quietly. We think it may be possible for us to move our consciousness out of these bodies into the bodies of those creatures in Mike's dreams."

"And do what?" John asked.

"You once suggested to me," Caroline said, "that if we could communicate with these minds in the past we could change them. And by doing that we could change the future."

"What day is it?" John asked distractedly, looking for his absent watch.

"Today is Christmas Eve," said James Sinclair, "and it's eleven thirty in the evening."

"But...." John objected, "this is a dream isn't it. Why can't I wake up?"

"I think you are very tired Professor Pendle," Drew said gently, "I had hoped we could brainstorm this problem now. But I see that you are tired. I think you need some time to gather your thoughts. Seraphina will go with you and explain the situation to you. Please do what she asks. And you need to be brought up to speed on the Altair computer. I'm so very sorry about what Lucy did to you. Lucy made a mistake. We all did. But you must forgive her and you know enough about us now to know that we all love you. Seraphina is your true destiny. Go with Seraphina. We'll meet again tomorrow to meditate."

A irresistible surge of warmth and love and encouragement flowed into him from the souls gathered round the great table. Seraphina stood up. She came round the table and took John's hand, leading him up the great staircase in the hall to one of the guest bedrooms on the first floor. Exhausted and confused, John lay back on the bed and stared at her. Her body was the same golden brown as Lucy and Imogen's. Her breasts were full and firm, her stomach flat, the whole body was immaculately toned, as they all were. His eyes were inexorably drawn to her pubis which also naked of hair, her labia capped by a perfectly formed clitoral hood. She was breathtakingly beautiful, but then, so were they all. Too beautiful to be real. All of this was a dream sent by Satan. She lay down beside him and undid Sonja's silk dressing gown.

You are not very good at the telepathy, are you.

“No,” John replied, “I find it difficult to put my words into thoughts.”

“There are thoughts that cannot be put into words. But you and I share a special language. The music of mathematics. So sleep in my arms and share your dreams with me and I will show you everything I know. And you will understand. Then, when you’re ready we’ll make love and you will go somewhere you never imagined possible.”

She folded her arms round him and hugged the sad face to her breasts. John allowed himself to succumb to a dream of exquisite mathematical symmetries and forgot about God.

CHAPTER 23

“Who is Seraphina?” Lucy demanded, back in the dining room.

“Seraphina is one of us,” Drew replied.

“Well of course she is,” Lucy snapped, “but who is she?”

“You really must learn to control your temper Lucy,” Drew said quietly. “We found her three years ago when I started collating DNA scans. She is very strong, like you. One of the strongest telepaths we have ever found. And she’s an expert in computer systems. You’ve been using the DNA computer haven’t you. Apart from me and Seraphina you are the only one who has fully interfaced with it. Otherwise you would not have been able to jump. Obviously the DNA transfer worked for Mike and John Pendle as well so the sooner you share this knowledge with us the better. What did you do to him?”

“I kissed him.”

“And Mike?”

“What do you think,” Lucy replied, grinning.

“Good, the DNA transfer works then. And so fast. We’re using the same technique the “consciousness” used on us when our cosmic soul modified our DNA thirty years ago. Sex and infection. Only we’re getting much better at it. And so are they. The Altair computer has made a tremendous difference. It amplifies our latent psi potential exponentially. That’s why you and Seraphina can teleport. It’s your special gift because of your maths, but clearly you can share it with the rest of us. You’d better stand under the mistletoe tomorrow morning. Make sure everyone gets a kiss.”

“So,” Lucy murmured, “that’s the gift that Thanatakis gave me. The potential to teleport. I thought it was something else. And who was Thanatakis?”

Drew shrugged, “I don’t know. It took us a long time to figure out how the Altair computer processes data. Especially when it kept vanishing. It is a self determining system which has developed its own intelligence. It is alive. Or rather it has consciousness of itself which is much the same thing. But to make it easier for it to communicate with us it was taking images of people from our memories and creating temporary avatars for its own identity. It’s probable that what appeared in your dream was the computer itself in the form of an avatar. It probably used someone from Seraphina’s subconscious as a model. Her father, most likely and gave it the name of the Greek professor. Her father is the penultimate link in this chain. I’m expecting him to show up very soon.”

"Thanatakis is what your supercomputer calls itself when it talks to me," Lucy stretched and put her hands behind her neck, "and Seraphina? Is she an avatar?"

"No. As I said, Seraphina designed the software both for the DNA computer and for the quantum computer. And tomorrow we will all interface with it."

"Where is this computer," Mike asked.

"It's all around you," Drew replied, "and in your DNA. We built both computers using genetically engineered carbon nanotubes. Separately they were both very small, very fast but inherently unstable and difficult to program by conventional methods. Then we tried connecting them in parallel. That was Seraphina's idea. We made three prototypes which were unstable. The fourth one worked. Eventually."

"And?" Mike raised his eyebrows.

"It vanished into thin air. Or rather it vanished into another dimension."

"Why am I not surprised?" Mike said with a wry grin, "if it vanished into thin air how do you access it?"

"It took Seraphina a while to figure that out. That's why there were some initial lapses in communication. It works in three stages. Firstly, the infective virus we used to distribute the AIDS and drug infection treatments also modifies the DNA of telepaths in the same way, so that the computer can interface with their minds and assimilate them. As we've seen, powerful telepaths with mathematical minds like Lucy and Seraphina can access it directly. Less powerful telepaths must be given the DNA password by physical contact. That's the second stage."

"Terry Gardner was using a keyboard," Mike said disbelievably.

"Terry Gardner is not a telepath. But even with humans the computer can pick up their brainwaves and extrapolate from them. Terry thought he was using a keyboard but the computer was actually reading his mind as he typed. Lucy didn't need to type. Thought is enough."

"Awesome," Mike gasped.

"Wait a minute," Caroline interjected, "what about the rest of us? I want to see the face of God. I've been looking for him all my life. Lucy, kiss the person next to you. Pass the kiss round the table."

A Mexican wave of passionate kisses flowed slowly round the table. When the last kiss had lingered on Sonja's lips Drew sat back and looked at them with an amused expression on his face.

"There was no need for that," he said, laughing quietly, "I think I kissed or touched all of you last time I saw you. I made a point of it. You are already genetically tuned to the computer. All you need now is the third stage, the password, and that is transmitted telepathically. Think

of the password as a kind of spell. In order to use it you must first visualise it. Would you like to see Altair 4? It's easier to make the initial connection if you can actually see it."

Mike nodded eagerly. Drew held out his hand and turned the palm upwards. A sparkle of intense light appeared in his palm then grew in size until it was an opalescent globe the size of a melon. It floated away from him and came to rest above the table.

"We can go ahead and share the code now. Hold hands everybody. The usual thing. Meditate and imagine that you can talk to that globe. Lucy will give you the mathematical coordinates. Think of it as a spell."

Fourteen pairs of hands joined around the table. Fifteen minds joined together and were woven into a seamless tapestry of coruscating energy fields which scanned each individual mind and opened its own mind to its creators. Mike framed a question about the true nature of DNA. In an instant the complex molecular structure of nucleic and ribonucleic acids was reformed into an elegant map of quantum particles which flitted between matter and energy. *"Quantum Super positioning,"* Mike gasped. The immaterial computer replied; *"Matter and energy. The same. Matter sees only matter. DNA exists in your material world as matter. But it also exists as pure energy. You live in many dimensions. Only a small part of you is here and that part can sense only the material world. Close your eyes and look at your companions."*

Mike closed his eyes and looked at the material bodies around the table. But they were no longer material bodies. Each had disassembled itself into patterns of flickering light, shimmering like constellations of densely packed stars, and each shimmering form was connected to the next by ephemeral iridescent plumes of light like the wings of angels, so beautiful that they pierced his soul. His eyes opened. The experience had clearly been equally startling for the others who were rubbing their eyes and looking confused.

"My God," James Sinclair whispered, "Altair 4. The Forbidden Planet. Matter manipulated by thought alone."

"Well done James," Drew smiled, "the Forbidden Planet. But actually, it's more like Vanamonde."

"Will somebody tell me what is going on," Nikos asked.

"You're too young Nikos," James smiled, "and you don't like old films. The Forbidden Planet was a nineteen sixties sci fi film. One of the best of its kind ever made. Based on Shakespeare's Tempest. It was about a deserted planet on which human explorers had discovered a vast underground machine whose function was not clear. Then one of them worked out that the machine could read mind waves and convert them into energy, enormously amplified, and the energy could be converted

into mass so that the builders of the machine had only to think of something to create it as a physical entity. Everything they wanted they could create by will alone. Material things, like buildings and artefacts. Cultural things, like music and art. Anything you could possibly imagine. Anything. But..."

"They forgot about their past," Drew said, "enormously intelligent, with millennia of civilisation behind them, but deep in their DNA were the remnants of the primitive animals from which they had evolved. And when they were asleep these monsters from the id, jealousy, greed, envy, anger, all the human vices, took physical form from the machine and destroyed them. All of them. And when the humans attempt to tap into the machine they too started to die horrendous deaths."

"Jesus Christ, Drew!" Caroline Hannay stood up and fixed Drew with an expression of total horror, "what have you done!!"

Drew held up hands in a placatory gesture, "it's okay. We haven't built a Domesday machine. What we have got is an AI computer which can communicate with us telepathically and it can provide us with answers. It's our own version of the cosmic consciousness from which our souls came and to which they will return. And it's also an interface, a gateway, to the cosmic consciousness itself. You know that we found out three years ago that the cosmic consciousness is really the collective memory of all our past lives recorded on space itself." He paused and looked around the table. "We also know that our human brains, powerful as they are, cannot begin to assimilate the recorded memories of even our own individual lives, never mind all those other past lives recorded in the cosmic consciousness. That's why only fragments of our souls come back to us when we are reborn into the material world. That's why we rarely remember who we are or where we have come from. And it's why the universe cannot speak to us directly. It just whispers to us in our dreams. The Altair computer has changed that. We can now speak to our souls and access everything that they know directly, instead of through random dreams and visions. We don't need terminals or keyboards. It talks directly to our minds. And it will do our bidding. That, Lucy, is why you must never lose your temper. Do you understand now?"

Lucy nodded. "Is it true that we can't kill?" she asked, returning to an abiding anxiety.

"We've always believed," said Caroline, "that we could not kill and that if we did we would die ourselves. Mike's dream of the death of the Neanderthal ancestor corroborates that. Perhaps part of our DNA programming includes a block which prevents us from taking life. Hilary doesn't have this block. And neither does Mike."

“How do I know?” said Mike, “I’ve never tried it. What if this computer gives me the power to kill by thought alone?”

We have three safeguards,” Drew said quietly, “one is the genetic block that Caroline mentioned which is our legacy from the Bonobo. Yes Mike, I know about that. The second is our long standing agreement that we never act alone. Everything is done by common consent. No one of us has the ability to invoke the full power of the Altair computer without the consent of the others. But the most powerful block is the computer itself. The computer is programmed to recognise this and it has its own block against violence, following Asimov’s laws of robotics. It will not allow us to kill. Any of us. It stopped Lucy and Mike from killing the people who were torturing Yesha and Nikos. In a life threatening situation it will always look for an alternative strategy. Its first priority is to protect life in general and our lives in particular, but not by killing. Seraphina and I are fully aware of the dangers demonstrated in the story of the Forbidden Planet. And,” he paused again, “there is also a general safeguard which is the lack of jealousy which has always governed our moral and sexual lives. Envy and jealousy are alien to us. Not part of our genetic makeup. We have always lived by that simple rule. Everything that we have, our bodies, our minds, our possessions are held in common. Available without question to each and all of us. We have no reason to kill because we have nothing to gain by it. We do not compete against each other.”

“Since the Altair computer came on online and disappeared some of us have been able to do things which we could only imagine doing before.” Drew paused to take stock, reading the reactions of his audience. “Collectively we have acquired a formidable range of skills all of which can be shared and amplified by the Altair computer,” his voice was calm and confident. “We have our telepathy, which allows us to communicate with each other. We have powers of telekinesis, which allow us to organise matter by thought alone, and some of us now have the ability to teleport, which allows us to move through space and perhaps through time, since they are a linked dimension,” he continued. “Lucy and Seraphina can teleport without the Altair computer. So can I, and so can Mike. I suspect most of us here should be able to do that. Less powerful empaths like John Pendle and James may need help from the computer. But there is still a problem.”

“Which is?” said Marcus, returning to the plot.

Drew pulled a face. “The ability to teleport does not depend solely on the Altair computer. It need to be initialised.”

“And?” Marcus persisted.

“You can be teleported by someone else, as Lucy just did with John

and Mike. But you heard what Seraphina said. If you want to teleport yourself you first need to be scared to death. Literally.”

“In the dream I had on Skiathos,” Lucy said, “those ancient people could do this. They played a game with a tiger. Teleporting at the moment that it was about to kill them. They were terrified of death. But that terror gave them the power to teleport. I did it. In the dream. That’s probably how I learned how to do it. And if we can teleport out of any dangerous situation how can anything threaten or harm us?”

“Death has a role in this,” Drew replied quietly, “death must be the most powerful emotion. If we can look it in the eye, maybe we can dodge it. But if it creeps up on us from behind we may be vulnerable. It is not something we should want to test. But if we want to teleport some of us may have to look death in the eye. I’m afraid we will need to return to this matter in the future.”

“What else can the Altair computer do?” James asked, remembering another aspect of the Forbidden Planet.

“Well, we also now know that our minds can influence matter on a nano scale.” Drew paused and looked at his fingers, “that’s how we manipulate our DNA, and, incidentally, that’s how we manipulate the carbon nanotubes. The Altair computer also enhances that ability. We are in principle able to create matter by thought alone. Just like the Krell.” Drew held out his hand, palm open and twisted it slightly. A single red rose appeared in his open hand. He gave it to Sonja with a kiss. The other gasped with astonishment. “It changes everything,” Drew said quietly, “everything.”

“The Krell,” Nikos asked, “who are the Krell? And what is Vanamonde. I still don’t undersand.”

James Sinclair started to laugh. “The Krell were the builders of the machine on Altair 4. In the film. And Vanamonde was the incorporeal intelligence in Arthur C Clarke’s *City and the Stars*. One of the finest science fiction stories ever written. Sometimes I seriously wonder about the relationship between nature and art. Especially where Drew is concerned.”

Nikos continued to look puzzled. “How?” he asked, “how does it work?”

Lucy smiled at him, “you already know. Imagine something you would like. Then invoke the password. Think the music of the spell.”

Nikos frowned. A bowl of strawberries and cream appeared on the table in front of him.

“How cool is that,” he murmured. The others allowed their imaginations to take physical form. Coffee, food, a carafe of wine, fruit all appeared around the table, followed by a white dove which

materialised in front of Imogen's face then flew up onto the mantelpiece.

"We can create life?" Caroline whispered incredulously, "what have you done Drew? What have you done?"

Drew sighed, "it is not life in the sense that it has been conceived and hatched from an egg. It has no mother or father. It is a biological machine fabricated from nanotubes imitating the DNA of a dove. After all, our own bodies are just complex biological machines fabricated from aggregations of atoms and molecules programmed by our own DNA. All organic life is just a molecular machine. It is the soul that is transcendent."

"Then how are we different?" Imogen insisted, "who programmed our DNA? It is alive uncle Drew, it has a mind and a consciousness. I can feel it. I can see with its eyes. I can feel its beating heart. It is as alive as we are. But it doesn't know what it is."

"No, Imogen," Drew said firmly, "it is not alive. It is an extension of your imagination into the real world. You can change it into anything you want. Or you can switch it off."

The dove flew from the mantelpiece and settled on Imogen's shoulder. In a flash it changed into an ermine which wrapped itself round Imogen's neck then vanished.

"It seems," said James quietly, "that some of us have other skills. Long forgotten skills. The witches have returned and they've not been educated at Hogwarts."

"No," Drew replied, "this is not magic. But one woman's magic is another man's science."

"I would rather like to think of myself as an elf," said Nikos, grinning mischievously, "elves are more fun. And since the Tolkien film they're mega cool." A mouse materialised on the table and ran towards Lucy who recoiled in horror.

"Hello, Lucy," the mouse thought at her, *"how would you like me to get into your knickers."*

"Are you blind as well as stupid Nikos," Lucy retorted, *"I'm not wearing knickers."*

The mouse advanced to the edge of the table, sat up on its hind legs and looked at Lucy with its tiny glittering eyes. Then settled down again and peered over the edge of the table at Lucy's naked lap. *"Nor you are,"* it said. The entire table convulsed with laughter. The mouse vanished.

"I think, children," Drew was still laughing, "I think we should play later. We have a much more serious problem to consider. A genuine matter of life and death. Something that really can kill us."

"The neutron star." Lucy said quietly, "time is running out."

"Yes," Drew said, "the neutron star. Irony isn't it, just when we think we've grasped the ultimate secrets of the universe and can start to manipulate it, the universe decides to wipe us out. John Pendle will probably say it's the will of God. We've taken a big bite out of the tree of knowledge and now it's going to fall on us and destroy us. We have to figure out how to escape it. The skills that we are now acquiring may have come just in time."

"The neutron star," Sophie's gentle face flashed from laughter to the edge of tears, "Are we going to die? Is there nothing we can do?"

"Yes, the neutron star," Drew's voice changed timbre, "John Pendle told me that we might survive if we are underwater, or in a deep cavern. I thought of using the Trikos underwater hotels. I had always intended that they should be a refuge for us if something went drastically wrong. Social collapse, nuclear war or drastic climate change. But only the Iceland hotel is finished. I hadn't reckoned on a gamma ray burst. Or this soon. We haven't had time to organise properly for it. Nevertheless, I've got as many of our strongest and most skilled people to Iceland as possible. But we can't rescue everyone, nor will it save us in the long run. The problem is not just shielding ourselves from the gamma radiation. That's lethal enough in its own right. The problems will come afterwards, when the Ozone layer is destroyed and the solar radiation gets through. The earth is going to become too hot to sustain most forms of life. Only the most primitive creatures will survive. And we are anything but primitive. That is why we have to find an alternative solution and Lucy and Mike are the key to that. And that is what we must resolve tomorrow."

A doorbell rang in the distant hallway. Marcus got up and left the table. When he returned he brought with him a tall and distinguished man in his late sixties. His face was spattered with suppurating red blotches and the remains of a shock of white hair which was fighting a losing battle against an invading crust of lethal black sores. He staggered to the table and collapsed into one of the chairs.

Mike Throckmorton leapt up. "Wavell," he shouted, "what the hell are you doing here?"

"Professor Meredith," Drew said, half standing and bowing to Wavell politely.

"Professor Thanatakis!" Lucy exclaimed.

"He's my boss," said Mike, "was my boss. For Christ's sake Wavell. Whatever happened to you?"

"Still your boss," Wavell sighed gently. He looked at the beautiful people arrayed around the table and coughed up a spurt of blood which he deftly caught in a stained handkerchief. "Ladies. Gentlemen. Let me

introduce myself. I'm Wavell Meredith. Mr Quatermain. I'm very honoured to meet you at last. I have some questions."

"Of course you do. And the honour is ours," Drew replied politely, "I've been expecting you and I'm very pleased to meet you. Please sit down. I take it you want to know where Seraphina is?"

"For sure."

"Why do you want to know?" Lucy asked calmly.

"Because Seraphina is my daughter, and I'm dying and I want see her again before I die. And I want to warn you. I think all of you are in extreme danger. There are guys looking for you and it's only a matter of time before they find you. They know that you all meet here at Christmas. They'll be here tomorrow. You can count on it."

"And I need not ask who these people are," Drew grinned.

"You know," Wavell scratched his scaly head, "of course you know. CIA. Rogue operation. They're the people who kidnapped your daughter and son in law. They want something from you and they ain't going to stop until they get it."

"Let me guess," Drew laughed, "they want to know how to make racially specific biogenetic weapons."

"Something like that," Wavell nodded, "but they also want you dead. You are a personal threat to them. You've made some powerful enemies and they want revenge."

"Then, I'm expecting them too," Drew smiled a smile of silent satisfaction, as though all the pieces in the jigsaw were finally falling into place.

"So you sent me here just to find your daughter?" Mike said angrily.

"Don't be mad at me Mike," Wavell sighed, "sure I wanted you to find my daughter because I remembered The Forbidden Planet and was concerned that she had gotten into something very dangerous. But I was asked to send you. Specifically you. Drew Quatermain does have an agenda and it's not just about genetic engineering. I'm sure of it. The Altair project is crucial to it. And so, I suspect, are you. But I just wanted to be sure that Seraphina was safe."

"She is safe, Professor Meredith," Drew said, smiling at the old man, "and she is here. You will see her soon. Relax. You did what you were asked to do, even though you did not know by whom or why. Now you are among friends and our only agenda is just to survive. What about you? You are not well."

"You can see," Wavell replied sadly, "radiation from the New York bomb. I guess it's terminal. How did you know who I am?" Wavell asked, though in his heart he knew that he should not have been surprised. Everything that had happened seemed to have a fatal

inevitability to it, as though Quatermain and his friends had willed it from the start.

“The CIS is not the only organisation that gathers intelligence,” Drew replied, “when your daughter joined Trikos her family background was checked. Your daughter has a very special gift and the probability is that you may have a little of it too.” *Sophie...*

Sophie obeyed Drew’s unspoken command. She stood up and came round the table to confront Wavell. She put her hands on either side of his face and to his utter astonishment kissed his cracked lips with a passion so intense that it coursed through his body and unlocked emotions that he had thought were long gone. She turned to Drew and nodded. *But not strong, she thought and he is dying. I can’t do much. He hasn’t got long.*

Wavell shook with emotion. He knew that Sophie Scott Devenish was at least in her fifties. But the lips that had kissed him and the body that had pressed against him were the lips and body of a twenty year old. And the kiss was more than just a kiss. She had changed him in some way. Not physically, for the damage to his genes was beyond repair, but his sceptical soul had lit up with a new certainty. He would die soon. But she had shown him beyond doubt that he had a soul and that it would transcend death. Mike Throckmorton had been right. These people were not wholly human. And neither, it seemed, was his daughter.

Drew looked at his watch. “It’s late,” he said, “tomorrow is Christmas Day. Tomorrow morning we’ll meditate as we always do and we will share all the skills we have. And then we must decide what we are going to do. In the meantime; sleep, make love, experiment, explore your new skills because we are all going to need them.” He paused and looked at Wavell, “Professor Meredith, Sophie will take you to a bedroom and she and Marcus will sit with you for a while and explain the situation to you. Tomorrow you will meet Seraphina and you will meditate with us and help us to make a final decision about our own lives. We also face imminent death. We will face it together.”

CHAPTER 24

John Pendle woke up around three o'clock on the morning of Christmas Day. He did not wake with the sudden terror of one escaping from a deadly nightmare. He woke instead to the sound of music. Distant ethereal music which sifted surreptitiously into his mind. The house, this strange house with its strange inhabitants, was singing to him and it sang in harmonious numbers of sublime symmetry. He raised himself up slightly in the bed and looked at the moonlit face of the sleeping Seraphina. Seraphina had indeed taken him somewhere that he had not been before. It continued to grieve him that these extraordinary women could give away their bodies so easily to people they hardly knew. But now he understood that there was a reason and the reason was all to do with the conservation of a rare mutation of DNA. Those to whom they gave their bodies were never truly strangers and the gift they gave was merely a wrapping for a more subtle present which transcended time itself. At that orgasmic instant he had looked into Seraphina's *ekstatic* face and seen the face of a newly born God desperate to rescue its own creators. Then it had gone and all that he remembered was that there was a truth which could be understood only by faith. The human phase of evolution had failed, just as the Dinosaurs had failed. The dominion of *homo sapiens sapiens* was about to end. The system was about to be reset and he was to be reset with it. The house continued to sing to him. After a while he turned over and returned to his dream, unaware of the dark angel which flickered in the shadows of the house as it prepared to relinquish its own existence to the creatures it had watched over for more than a million years.

In the morning Seraphina met her father at breakfast. The meeting was swift and passionate. Seraphina had come late in Wavell's life, the offspring of a brief and reckless marriage between the professor and a gifted but frivolous student who had soon left him for a younger man. At the age of thirty four Wavell had found himself responsible for a baby. He did his duty and brought up Seraphina on his own, putting her through school and university where she repaid his devotion with dazzling intellectual brilliance. Although they had always been close he had never been aware of Seraphina's other talent and Seraphina herself had never known what she was until the aftermath of her car crash was detected by Drew Quatermain's omnivorous computers winnowing databases for any evidence of telepaths. Once found she had been invited to join Trikos at a salary which was beyond belief for a project

of such intellectual magnitude that salaries were irrelevant anyway. Just to be there was reward enough. But it had meant cutting herself off from her beloved father. Now they were together again and her father was dying.

John Pendle watched anxiously as this strange new man hugged the daughter he had not heard from for over two years and again wondered whether he was doomed to forever sharing the women who had seduced him into this circle of lust. Seraphina was crying tears of joy and desperation. Wavell continued to hug her. No words were spoken but the link between the newly connected minds was instantaneous. Wavell now understood everything and was purged of all his fears. Compared with what was to come his own death seemed trivial. He would be with these strange people when it happened and he would die and live with them.

Not everyone came early to breakfast, nor was there the traditional Christmas Day exchange of gifts. Indeed it would have been hard to tell that it was Christmas Day at all were it not for the vestigial decorations with which the Sophie and Hilary had festooned the chandeliers and paintings in the main hallway, and the Christmas tree, topped with an aged angel, which stood at the bottom of the stairs. Wavell looked at the last two sausages and the rasher of bacon in the chafing dish on the sideboard. The food was about to run out. Wavell wondered whether it would be polite to take the last helping.

"Go ahead," a voice whispered in his head. He looked round, startled. Sophie Devenish was standing just behind him. "Go ahead," she smiled, "there's plenty more. Are you feeling a little better this morning?"

"A little," Wavell replied. And it was true. Whatever Sophie had done to him had temporarily halted the raging onslaught of cellular decay. The pain in his chest had gone. His mind was clear. The bleeding had stopped. But in his heart he knew it would not last. Sophie touched his cheek. "*It will last long enough.*" Wavell felt her overwhelming compassion and was consoled by it.

He helped himself to the last of the cooked breakfast and rejoined Seraphina and John Pendle at the table. Sophie followed him with a bowl of cornflakes. The photographs Wavell had been shown by Mike did not begin to do Sophie Devenish justice. In the flesh all of these women were unbelievably beautiful and the firm flesh that was so scarcely concealed beneath their short silk chitons left little to the imagination. He raised his eyes as Drew Quatermain came into the dining room and went to the chafing dish from which he helped himself to sausages, bacon and scrambled egg. Wavell did a double take. No one

had come into the room to refill the chafing dish. Drew sat next to Sophie, leaned over and kissed her, not on the cheek but on the lips.

"You're wondering where my breakfast came from," Drew said, grinning conspiratorially.

"Well, yes," Wavell replied, "I thought I took the last of the cooked breakfast."

"I think you look better this morning. Would you like some coffee?" Drew was still grinning, as though about to share a huge joke. Wavell nodded. A cup of coffee materialised out of thin air beside his plate. Wavell shuddered.

"You really did it, didn't you," he said in awe.

"Your daughter did it. She designed the software and the architecture. You should be very proud of her. She has made poverty and starvation a thing of the past. We can make food out of thin air, literally. Now nothing need die so that another can live. And not just food. Everything. All we have to do is think about it. Imagine what we want and will it to happen. The computer does the rest. We really are what imagination makes us." He looked up as the slender Sonja sat down beside him. Drew kissed her with the same tenderness that he had kissed Sophie, "too bad it's come too late for humans."

"Where is everybody?" Sonja asked, shaking her glossy auburn hair. A bowl of muesli appeared in front of her, followed by a glass of fruit juice. They had learned very quickly.

"Marcus is with Caroline," Sophie grinned lasciviously, "the young ones will be down soon, I expect."

"How does this work?" John Pendle asked, like Wavell, baffled by phenomenon which would have been more at home in Star Trek replicator than in the dining room of an eighteenth century mansion.

"It's all to do with nanotechnology," Seraphina replied, "nanotubes are so small that they have some of the dimensional characteristics of quantum particles. They are all around us. Some of us are strong enough to manipulate them with our own minds, but the Altair computer makes it much easier because it amplifies our intentions and holds the patterns for the things we want to create. The nanotubes can be programmed to aggregate in size and shape until they flip into the macro world. We can make almost anything. As you can see."

"And they can imitate organic materials which then multiply and take their form from DNA templates. So we can visualise them into food, or whatever," Drew added, "I call it psitech. The triumph of mind over matter."

"And are you going to market this technology," Wavell asked incredulously, "this will really put a tiger amongst the pigeons."

"No," Drew replied, "it would not be wise to give this to humans. You know exactly what they'd do with it. They'd make weapons to kill each other until they realised that they don't need weapons to kill. The mind is enough. Their minds. Not ours. Anyway, after tomorrow there will probably not be a market."

"Will you use it to kill the people who are coming for you?"

"No," Drew sighed and looked sad, "we can't kill. Not when we are in control of ourselves. Perhaps we could kill if we succumbed to human emotions, to anger for example. Or drugs which damage our consciousness. That's why I released the anti HIV and anti narcotic viruses. Many gays have empathic abilities which I wanted to save. And drugs exposed our people to the risk of dangerous telekinetic fits which might reveal our potential skills to public scrutiny. I didn't want that."

"I see," Wavell pondered the past, "and your friends. Puck and Hilary? Can you really kill by thought alone?"

"I don't know. I didn't want to take the risk. It was Puck's near miss with Adrian that alerted us to the danger. We had to make telepaths and potential telepaths resistant to drugs. Given our psychic skills it was easy to change the DNA in a virus and use it to transmit the necessary changes. Unfortunately I made a terrible mistake. As Nikos and Ayesha found out. They almost lost their telepathic powers when they were given drugs. Otherwise, things might have been different."

"So this was not something you did to benefit all of humanity?" John Pendle was also intrigued by the morality of this story.

"I'm afraid not," Drew continued, "that was a side effect which appears to have caused more harm than good. Humans are addicted to vice, it seems."

"And could you really devise a biogenetic weapon using this technology?" Wavell asked.

"Yes, we could introduce almost any variant into the genome. But we would never do anything to harm any living creature. Even a human. Life is sacred. Unfortunately humans are already doomed. And so are we if we don't get a move on."

The group at the great table was joined by Caroline and Marcus, flushed and smiling. Sophie grinned at them. Even with his formidable regenerative powers Marcus could only screw one of them at a time. Sophie had enjoyed her turn and come down to breakfast, leaving them to it but with her mind still open to the sensations of their collective consciousness at its most intimate.

Little by little the table filled up until all eighteen places were occupied. No one had dressed for breakfast. All but Wavell were wearing dressing gowns, kimonos or chitons, except for Lucy, Imogen

and Mike Throckmorton who were defiantly wearing nothing at all. Wavell stroked his moustache and drank in the divine bodies; the two very different but immaculately complementary women and the saturnine Greek god with his broad shoulders, six pack torso and long muscular legs. Mike nodded to him and grinned. It was obvious what had kept them from breakfast.

“Okay,” said Drew when everyone had stopped eating, “let’s get on with this before it’s too late. Lucy; how long have we got?”

“Sometime tonight. Maybe a little later. Not long.” She sobbed, “uncle Drew. I don’t want to die. None of us wants to die.”

“We aren’t going to die,” Drew said gently, “we’ll find a way out of this.” He paused, then looked at John Pendle, “John, Seraphina has explained the situation to you. You know what we want to do. Do you think it is feasible?”

“Let’s put aside the theories of David Bohm and Garrett Lisi,” John began, “for the time being. Because nothing is certain. As you said; there are no incorrigible propositions. What we do know is that the ultimate particles of matter, if indeed they are particles, elude observation. We can never see them as they really are because the mere act of looking at them changes them. Part of them, perhaps a very small part, is in this world with us. The rest is somewhere else. We ourselves are made of these particles which have been present in the universe since the universe began. We are literally made from stardust. And it follows that a part of what we are made of may very well exist in some other dimension which we, you, have somehow learned how to access. In addition we also know that something like ninety five percent of the universe is made of Dark Matter or Dark Energy. We can describe it as a mathematical hypothesis but we don’t know what Dark Energy really is. I’m prepared to believe that there is a relationship between the unknown forms of sub atomic particles and the Dark Energy which permeates the universe, and that your so-called psychic powers are a manifestation of this relationship. But how we articulate that relationship I do not know.”

“Maybe all we have to do is imagine it,” Drew interjected, “then we can will it to exist.”

John shrugged, “it still needs a great leap of faith to believe that our rational view of the universe really is the way it is. In the end Reason demands as much faith as God. It is the ultimate test of our faith in ourselves. We’d better be right.”

“Our own experiences suggest that David Bohm was also right about the holonomic nature of consciousness,” Caroline replied, “our consciousness is not solely our own. It is made up of all the other

minds that have overlapped with ours. In our case it also includes parts of our collective cosmic consciousness. Our eternal souls. And now it also includes the Altair computer.”

“Are we sure that the Altair computer will come with us. If we do this?” Marcus asked.

“The Altair computer is designed to be a component of our own consciousness,” Seraphina said, “everything we know is stored in its memory banks together with profiles of our individual genome. And all of this information is now incorporated into our DNA. DNA itself is nothing more than a complex biological computer program which stores information, reads it sequentially and acts on it to synthesize matter. The Altair computer now manages that program. And the data stored in our DNA is a direct track back to our remote past. We are the Altair computer. Wherever we go it goes. In addition it also links us to all the knowledge stored in the recordings of our past lives in the cosmic consciousness. It acts in effect as an operating system which gives us access to the memories of everything that our species has ever done or achieved.” She paused to sip from her coffee. “John and I both think that the cosmic consciousness is not a linear recording. It exists outside time and records all of our past lives, not sequentially but simultaneously, as they are happening. It may also record the future, but we don’t seem to have significant access to that, though Drew and Ayesha do have the ability to reduce a range of possibilities to likely probabilities.”

“Does Altair 4 think that it is possible?” Lucy asked.

Seraphina nodded, “yes,” she replied, “but...only if we are prepared to die.”

“I think we knew that,” Drew looked at John Pendle and raised his eyebrows. “Mike, can we connect to our ancestors?”

“When I went back with Lucy and Imogen,” Mike said, “we were able to share our consciousness with our remote ancestors. We didn’t just see through their eyes. They were aware of our presence and they welcomed us. They are us. Our ancestors. Our genes are their genes. We can certainly visit them. Whether we can stay with them is another matter.”

“And the genetics?” Drew looked at Mike expectantly.

“The genome stores vast amounts of information,” Mike replied, “vast amounts, including, as Caroline says, fragments of DNA from our remote ancestors. The genome is a continuous record of our evolution. Our ability to access and change what appeared to be redundant parts of our DNA has allowed us to recover psychic powers which have been switched off for millennia. I don’t see a problem either, providing we

are one hundred percent confident that we can access the digital image of our own DNA from our subconscious memory and carry it with us. As John says, it requires a great leap of faith. Faith in ourselves, really.”

“And ultimately” John repeated excitedly, “the molecules from which DNA is fabricated are reducible to fundamental particles which themselves contain the holographic image of our universe and can exist both as energy and as mass. They’ve been here since the big bang. Everything that we are made of has been here from the very beginning. I agree with Mike. We can store that image in our consciousness and take it back with us. And what we don’t hold in our own collective mind is stored in the Altair computer which travels with us because it is part of us. Everything, including all the genomes digitised for the ARK project. I assume that your intention was to use the nanotechnology to recreate the Earth’s current flora and fauna?”

Drew nodded. “I had always thought that there was a risk to the survival of life on the Earth, but I had not envisaged this particular risk. The ARK project would indeed allow us to repopulate the Earth if we had to.”

“How far back must we go?” James asked. Hilary sat silent and tight lipped beside him, thinking about all the animals that would die in the coming Armageddon, including her own precious dogs and horses.

Drew smiled a gentle smile at her. “Don’t worry Hilary. I know how you feel about the animals so I’ve had individual genomes digitised for all your horses and dogs. They’re stored in the Altair computer. They will come with us and we will recreate them. Never fear. Everyone who is dear to us has been scanned.”

Hilary said nothing. In the face of extinction Drew Quatermain had found time to think of what would make her most happy. He had thought of everything. When she had first met Drew, over thirty years ago, she had instinctively distrusted him. Now she trusted him without question.

“About forty thousand years ago,” Mike responded to James’s question, “modern human beings reached Europe and encountered two unknown species of highly evolved sapient hominids which were superior to them in every respect except for their inability to kill their own kind. They virtually destroyed both of them. At that point the evolutionary tree branched in favour of *homo sapiens sapiens*. We can go back to that evolutionary node and make sure that it branches in our direction.”

“But,” Imogen protested, “if we do that we will change the future. We will not exist.”

“No,” Drew replied, “we will exist because we will be there, not

here. They will not. Not in their present form anyway.”

“You’re going to kill them?” Hilary looked up, startled, “I thought we didn’t kill.”

“No,” said Drew, “not kill them. Our experiments with HIV and drugs have proved that we can change human DNA as well as our own by the power of thought alone. We can modify their DNA using a genetically engineered virus in the same way that our collective cosmic consciousness modified us to give us the powers that we now have. We will transmit it to the first humans as an infection which will interfere with their gametes and block the conception of male children. Human males will become extinct within two generations.”

“Is it right?” said Imogen, tears of loss trickling silently down her cheeks, “if what you say is true then you are condemning all of humanity to nonexistence. Everything they have achieved, all the art, the music, the literature, the science, everything. It will all be lost.”

“And the war, the relentless pursuit of death, the torture, the bestiality,” Drew replied, “the endless cycles of destruction, the competitive greed, the envy, the racialism, the lethal religions, the manic Darwinism, the rape of the Earth’s resources. Where can I stop? Humans have consistently chosen evil over good. If I believed in God I would say they were the children of Satan. Most of the great achievements we attribute to humanity were actually the achievements of people like us, the empaths and telepaths whose souls survive death and talk to eternity. And all of the knowledge and experience of those past lives has already been recorded in the cosmic consciousness and is open to us because it is us. It will not be lost. We can recreate those aspects of the human cultural world if we want to because it is really our world anyway. I have no conscience about this. Humans took control of the Earth forty thousand years ago and systematically eliminated all of the other self aware hominid species. And in the space of a mere three hundred years they have brought the entire planet to the brink of destruction. They are going to wipe themselves out anyway. Even without the neutron star, overpopulation and climate change will make the earth uninhabitable within the next hundred years. We have an opportunity to prevent that happening. We will go back with all of our knowledge, all of our psitech abilities, our enormously increased longevity and the Altair computer, and we will hit the ground running. We will have a forty thousand year start on them. We will save the planet both from humans and from the neutron star. We will figure it out. Forty thousand years is a very long time.”

“And the scientists?” said John Pendle, “the engineers? The technology?”

"The same thing," Drew replied with growing passion, "in your heart you know that the greatest scientists spoke directly to the universe. Great scientists do not stand only on the shoulders of giants. They also stand on the shoulders of ghosts. They too are part of our heritage. As for the technology? With the psychic powers that we now have, that kind of mechanistic human technology will be irrelevant. We can create organic molecular machines using nano-technology. We have the powers of wizards. What is essential to humans? Food, shelter, clothing? That is the root of the human economy. But we can feed ourselves without agriculture and make shelter without bricks. We do not need clothes. We can heal ourselves without medicine and travel without moving. We can fabricate everything we need from our imaginations by transmutation. Everything. And, in truth, we need very little."

Waves of stunned silence reverberated round the table. Imogen sighed and began to cry properly. Lucy hugged her.

"It seems wrong," Imogen whimpered, "to deny them their existence. Wrong."

"They denied us our existence," Caroline replied, "they almost wiped us out. From the moment they first met us. And with such bestial cruelty. We will not do that to them. The males will die out naturally but the women will interbreed with us and become us. The best of their genetic inheritance will be preserved."

"And besides," Drew added, "if we do nothing billions will die excruciating deaths in the very near future, including us. If they have never been born they will never feel that pain. We will spare them that. And all the pain they inflicted on themselves in the past."

"I wouldn't count on that," James Sinclair entered the debate for the first time, "this is the classic time travel paradox: how can I be born if I go back in time and kill my grandfather. But that assumes that there is only one universe and only one temporal dimension. I'm sure John will agree that there are plenty of physicists who believe that there may be an infinite number of universes, each one created by branching decisions. So, if we go back and change the past at Mike's evolutionary node what we may actually do is create two universes. One which continues along this timeline, in which humans dominate the Earth and are wiped out by the neutron star. And another parallel universe in which we evolve our own culture and, hopefully, survive the neutron star. We should not rule it out."

"I'm well aware of parallel universes," John Pendle sighed, "some current cosmological theories depend on it for the maths to work. But it still requires another massive leap of faith which we have no way of testing. I wonder whether there really is some form of determinism at

work. Our destiny really is being shaped by forces beyond our control. Maybe this is the will of God. The preservation of the life force against all the odds.”

“Then we should not resist what instinct tells us is right,” Drew replied, “our instinct is to survive. Pure Darwinism. And it seems that we have been given an extraordinary evolutionary advantage to help us to survive.”

“We’ve always thought that,” Caroline said quietly, “but we don’t believe in gods.”

“No,” John added sadly, “I can no longer believe in a God who would allow all life to be destroyed by a cosmic event which took place before the Earth was even fully formed. I wonder, now, whether organic life has any real place in the universe. Neutron stars are not uncommon. They can sterilise entire galaxies. It’s almost as though the universe routinely purges itself of life. If that is so its purpose must be beyond our comprehension because we are not part of it. Just an accidental infestation. Now it’s our turn to be purged. Maybe the world of the spirit has no place in the world of matter. We are invaders in a place where we are not welcome. Where we do not belong.”

“We will have forty thousand years to find the answer to that,” Caroline replied.

“What about the others?” Puck asked, “all the others we’ve been looking for all these years? We’ve found thousands a little like us. Trikos alone employs at least fourteen thousand. And we know there are many others out there, like Professor Meredith, who we never found because their DNA was never recorded onto any databank.”

“If we succeed,” Drew replied quietly, “we will totally rewrite the history of the last forty thousand years. Since they share our DNA our present companions will be part of the rewrite. This world will never have existed. But there will be another world, our world, in which they will have their lives. Their genomes are stored in the Altair databanks. You saw what Imogen and Nikos did last night. If we can replicate mice we can replicate men, and Hilary’s pets and horses. We will recreate them all using their own digitised DNA as templates. It will be our first priority.” He paused. Puck looked up at him expectantly. “If we fail we will all die and return to the cosmic consciousness to be reborn, who knows when.”

Puck nodded then put her arms round Tinkerbelle and drowned her face in Tinkerbelle’s cascade of golden hair. Silence settled on the group like a shroud.

“What exactly are you planning to do?” John Pendle asked.

“You remember that when we went back with Mike,” Lucy replied,

"I briefly went into the mind of the woman his ancestor was making love to. She welcomed me. She wanted me there and I knew that she would accept any changes I made to her. That's why I pulled out. I saw the risk to the future if I acted on my own. They knew that they were becoming extinct. They would accept anything in order to survive. Like us they have nothing to lose. With us we can all survive. They will accept us. That was their plan. We are the destiny they intended for themselves forty thousand years ago."

"Are we agreed on this," Drew asked eventually, looking gravely round the solemn faces. The answer came in a veil of tears.

"Then how do we do it?" Nikos asked.

"Lucy and I make love in the Square of Three," Mike said, "and carry back with us the template of the modified virus. We infect our hosts and return here. They pass it on to *homo sapiens sapiens* when he comes to enslave them. Sex does the rest. Hey presto."

"Won't work like that," Caroline said thoughtfully, "Mike is able to travel back to this evolutionary node and take us with him. But we have always gone there on the cusp of an orgasm and orgasms do not last forever. Even for us. This life pulls us back. The little death is not enough. We have to leave this life permanently. It's a one way ticket."

The implications of this thought subdued the circle into another petrified silence.

"The logic," Caroline said eventually, "is that Mike must die and take our consciousness with him." Mike nodded in agreement, willing it seemed, to accept the ultimate sacrifice for the ones he loved.

"The logic," said John Pendle, "is that we must all go back. If Mike goes back alone and succeeds in changing the future we ourselves may no longer exist. And one is not enough. We need to be absolutely certain that all the knowledge we carry in our collective consciousness is taken back to the beginning. Otherwise we could waste thousands of years reinventing wheels. We could find ourselves back here in exactly the same situation. It's all or nothing. An act of sublime faith. In ourselves."

"I agree," Caroline continued, "and since we are all going to die soon anyway the real question is how we choose to die. Do we commit an act of collective suicide, like some crazy religious cult, or do we wait for the neutron star to kill us. That might be a slow and painful death by radiation poisoning. Or is there another way?"

"It will have to be suicide," John Pendle said, "the gamma radiation will scramble our DNA. Who knows what we would take back to the past. Think of the Star Trek transporter that goes wrong and deposits a heap of goo at the other end. We can't risk that."

“How?” said Sonja, clutching Drew’s arm in terror.

“Thanatakis,” Lucy murmured, remembering an ancient dream, “that was his gift to me. We cannot take life but he can give you all the gift of death.”

“Yes,” said Seraphina, also remembering, “Thanatakis. I remember now. Death is the gateway to eternal life. A system reset. We shut down and restart the soft machine.”

“How?” Drew echoed Sonja.

Lucy shook her head, “I don’t know,” she said resignedly.

“What will it be like?” the normally silent Yesha spoke for the first time, her soft voice trembling, one hand clutching Nikos, the other gripping the hand of the fear stricken Amethyst beside her.

“We’ve danced at the edges of death many times. Every time we meditate. Every time we make love and allow ourselves to go that little bit further from lust into ekstasis. We know for certain that our souls survive. Only the body dies,” Sophie smiled at the young ones reassuringly, “and even if we fail, our souls will eventually come back to other bodies in the future, as they have in the past. We do not fear death because we know we are immortal.”

“There may not be a future to come back to,” said John Pendle tersely, “the effects of the neutron star will massively accelerate global warming. Once the planet’s surface temperature has risen by only three degrees the tipping point will be reached. Within a hundred years the earth will be burnt to a cinder. It will be millions of years before life reappears, if it ever does. And then the whole evolutionary process starts again. Probably without the unique genes which make us what we are.”

“Wait, wait,” Imogen said, “why are we talking about suicide? If we can’t kill others how can we possibly kill ourselves? We can’t do this. And anyway Seraphina said that the Altair computer will not let us die. It will find some way to keep us alive.”

“The alternative,” John replied, “is to sit here and wait for the neutron star to kill us. Is that what we want?”

“This is an impossible paradox,” Caroline said, “we have come to believe that death is our greatest enemy and that we have defeated death by becoming immortal. Yet, in order to escape to the past, we must kill ourselves in the present. Without any certainty that.....without any certainty. Only faith.”

“I think we’re getting confused here,” Drew said crisply, “it seems to me that we have three options. Firstly, we can do nothing. If the gamma ray burst hits the Earth as Lucy predicts we will all die anyway. Our souls may survive but there will be no sentient self aware life for them to return to for thousands, maybe millions, of years. Secondly, we

send Mike back to the past with a digital template for a virus which will block the evolutionary success of *homo sapiens sapiens* by inhibiting their ability to produce male children thus making the world safe for our kind. The downside is that the strategy may fail for a whole host of reasons, not least because we would not be able to transmit all of our present knowledge back to our ancestors in the past. They would have to learn everything that we have learned for themselves. Thirdly we could try to send all our souls back to the past, as Lucy suggests, and occupy the bodies of our ancestors. But in order to do this we would all have to die because the psychic energy created by our orgasms is transitory. Our souls are drawn back to this life. The psychic energy of death must be greater than sex but it is also terminal. We would have to kill ourselves and I too suspect that Altair computer will not allow us to do that. Also Mike remembers that our remote ancestors were themselves dying out. There were very few of them left. We don't know how many there are or why they were dying out. But there do not seem to have been many of them. Maybe they have the same problems with reproducing themselves that we have. It seems that immortals cannot have large families. It's obvious why. That's why they were breeding with the Neanderthals. To pass on at least some of their genetic inheritance, to which we are the heirs. But we have at least fourteen thousand empaths within Trikos alone and the Altair computer knows of many more. Without bodies for us to share in the past many of us would remain inert in the cosmic consciousness for a very long time."

Drew stopped and thought for a while. "Well, as I said, in principle we could fabricate new bodies. But there is another possibility," he said quietly, "we can share in Seraphina and Lucy's ability to teleport. We know that she can bring others with her and we now all share in this ability. I see no reason why all of us should not teleport our bodies back through time with Lucy and Mike to guide us and the Altair computer to collect and transport the strongest of the others." He paused and drank from a glass of water. "I'm open to persuasion. Lucy? What do you think?"

An expression of horror and incomprehension flashed across Lucy's face. "I don't know," she said, "I've only just learned how to teleport. I brought Mike and John here without any problem but...." she paused to think, realising that this was what Drew had been working towards from the beginning; the wildest and most dangerous of dreams. "I don't know whether I would be able to take all of us," she replied quietly, "and what about all the other telepaths?"

Drew raised his eyebrows, "we believe that the Altair computer has scanned and stored the genomes of all viable telepaths and empaths."

“And how many are potentially strong enough to teleport,” Mike asked.

“About three thousand,” Seraphina replied, “Drew had them all report to the Iceland complex. They’re all together. They’ve been primed on the neutron star and they’re waiting for our decision. But none of them have been shown how to teleport. They have the genes and they have the mathematical key. But they would have to face imminent death before the Altair computer would act to save them. And they don’t know where to go. We ourselves don’t know where to go!”

“They are the strongest we have found,” Drew added, “other than ourselves, and they have a wide spectrum of skills. This is the best we can hope to do. Your role would be to lead us because you and Mike alone know where to go. The rest can follow your coordinates.”

Lucy shook her head but John Pendle jumped in before she could make her objection.

“There’s another problem,” John interjected, “I find the idea of teleporting extraordinary and I have no real explanation for it. Only faith will do. But it’s one thing for Lucy to teleport me from my bedroom at Keele to Croxton Hall. That’s bizarre enough. It’s quite another to teleport thousands of bodies forty thousand years into the past. If, as you say, our ability to do this depends on psychic energy, then the energy required would be enormous. Maybe beyond us. Maybe that would require the energy of all our deaths as well.”

“It’s not death itself,” Seraphina said, “it’s the fear of death. At least for the first time. After that it gets easier. That’s how it has been for Lucy and me. For the rest of you it may be necessary for you to believe that you are about to die before you can commit to jumping.”

“Another form of psychic unlocking?” Caroline questioned.

“Yes,” Seraphina nodded, “that’s about it. You must believe that it is possible and have faith in yourselves and be scared to death.”

“I agree,” Lucy mused, “but there is yet another problem. In order to jump we also need to know exactly where we’re jumping to. And if we are to jump back in time as well we need to know exactly when we are jumping to. We don’t have answers to either of those questions. I’ve no idea where Mike and I were, or when we were. It could be anywhere in the world. We need to be able to visualise the destination. How can I visualise a place I have visited only in orgasmic visions. It may not exist. I think this would be very dangerous.” She sat back in her chair and looked at Drew. A suffocating silence settled on them.

“Suppose,” Lucy said eventually, “suppose Mike and I go back into the past using our usual method, and make contact with our ancestors, maybe we can act as a psychic beacon for the rest of you to orientate

on. That's what happened the first time with Nikos and Yesha. I didn't know where they were. I had to find their souls. Maybe we can jump to a person, to a soul, as well as to a place that we know. But in order to jump we must first be in telepathic contact with the target."

"Well done Lucy," Drew replied, "that is the most constructive option I've heard so far. But we still have to resolve the problem of dying. And I think we all need to go away and search our souls for the answer to that one."

"Let me get this straight," said a forlorn and forgotten voice, the voice of Wavell Meredith, sitting quietly at the end of the table listening to the ebb and flow of doom. The weeping minds turned to the dying man.

"I always wondered what your agenda was Drew Quatermain," Wavell said, "now I know. You're going to transport yourselves forty thousand years into the past, sterilise human evolution and rebuild the world in your own image. Jesus H. Christ! That is one hell of an agenda!" He coughed and pulled out his handkerchief, "and you're planning to take three thousand twenty first century folks back to the Stone Age with you. Jesus H Christ. That is the most savage of worlds. Hunter gatherers. Deadly carnivores. How will they live? How can they even hope to survive?"

Drew stood up and looked at Wavell with a face torn between desperate grief and sublime elation. "All my life," he said, "I've dreamed of what it would be like to go back to square one. To do a complete system reset. To start again with a clean slate and rebuild the world from scratch. I had never expected it to work out quite like this. But I have always planned for us to survive an apocalyptic event. In my dreams. And in the dreams of my colleagues. Down to the last detail. We know exactly what to do, and the Altair computer can make reality out of our dreams. Literally. We're going back to Prospero's island with all the techno-magic that you can possibly imagine. We can do it. I know we can. We will survive. After all, humans managed to survive with nothing else but the will to kill. We have so much more."

"And what about me?" Wavell sighed, "what about this dying old man? Can I come too? Just to see the critter?"

"Papa," Seraphina said sadly, "even if we can teleport ourselves back into the past there is no way that we can take your body with us. The radiation has scrambled your DNA. You were never scanned by the Altair computer because it never found a DNA match on any other database. So there is no template for your healthy DNA in its memory. It will not be possible to reconstitute your body at the other end. If you go back with us you will still be dying of radiation sickness. Your body

must die. But maybe we can take your conscious soul with us and create a body for you.”

“Or find an ancestral host,” Mike suggested.

“Never mind,” said Wavell resignedly, “until Sophie kissed me last night I was always an atheist. I never expected to survive death. Now I am not so sure. Now I know that I have a soul and that it will never die.” He leaned forward and put his head in his hands, “I guess that is comforting. I guess that’s why folks want to believe. Into your hands I commend my spirit,” he said, succumbing to a recollection of a godly childhood.

“It’s true,” Sophie said quietly, “your soul will survive your body. We are sure of it.”

“Professor Meredith,” Drew said quietly, “we can make one last gift to you. Sick as you are, your mind is not sick and it can still experience pleasure. Even if your body can’t. Go with Puck and Tinkerbell. They will give you a Christmas present you will never forget.”

Wavell looked at the two women whose photographs he had seen at that first briefing with Mike Throckmorton. They were as young and beautiful as the others. He sighed and remembered what he had said about them.

“You will come with us” they whispered in unison to his mind, *“and we will teach you all that we know.”* The bisexual Puck and Tinkerbell took Wavell’s arms and led him to his quiet bedroom where they returned him to his own past and reminded him of what it was like to be young.

In Croxton village two black Chrysler Voyagers drew into a small layby near the ornate gates at the end of the mile long driveway to the Hall. Ormen Lange got out of the front seat of first Voyager, followed by Greg Barbas. Half a dozen athletic young men with shaved heads and bodies decorated with lurid tattoos of death and sex, piled out of the second Voyager, led by the unspeakable Wayne Kraitmann. It was cold, and beginning to snow.

“Guess this is it,” Lange said, huddling into his parka and pointing at the mansion distantly visible at the apex of the carefully landscaped parkland.

“Going to hit them now?” said Kalpin, his eyes gleaming with anticipation, “do we get to fuck the broads? Before we wipe them?”

Lange looked at him contemptuously.

“The broads might kill you,” he said, “you asshole. Haven’t you learned anything? You do as you’re told. Or I will kill you. I mean it

asshole.”

Kraitmann scowled. He turned to the other young men and shrugged his shoulders. They looked disappointed. Kraitmann’s promises were not worth a tinker’s fuck.

“No,” Lange continued, “we go away and make ourselves invisible.” He produced a satellite map of the hall and its surroundings. “There’s a cottage here,” he said, pointing at the map, “in the woods. Take your people there. Neutralise any opposition and wait for us. Have you got silencers?”

“Oh, fuck,” the incompetent Kraitmann muttered, “that’s a negative.”

“No shooting then. We don’t want to alert anyone do we. We’ll come back when it’s dark.”

“Where you going?” Kraitmann asked.

“Need to know,” Lange muttered, thinking about the cosy bar of the pub he had seen in the village. A cellphone buzzed insistently. Lange answered it. His face lit up.

“The ships are in position over Quatermain’s underwater bolt holes”. They’ll hit them tonight when we hit the house. Check your watches. I’m not taking any chances. If these freaks really can deploy psi warfare we need to take out all the women. But I want Quatermain alive. And remember, these are creatures from hell. Satan’s own spawn. It’s our duty to God to exterminate them.”

“It’s good to go then?” Kraitmann asked, totally unaffected by apocalyptic rhetoric.

“Affirmative. It’s good to go. And you do as you’re fucking told. I want to talk to Quatermain. But the broads go first. Understand?”

“If you say so,” Kraitmann said, disappointed. His troops were expecting to enjoy the spoils of war before terminating them. In his mind it was a diabolical waste of fucking time.

CHAPTER 25

Wavell Meredith spent the rest of the day in the arms of two beautiful women who did things to his mind and to each other that he would never have believed possible. Like most men he considered girl on girl action to be a turn on, and it certainly had that effect on him, stripping away his sixty plus years and the debilitating effects of the radiation sickness. For a while they appeared to endow him with the priapic virility of a thirty year old at the peak of his performance. But it was nothing compared to the sensation he shared with them of endless roller coaster orgasms felt through the unfamiliar flesh of the women themselves. Like John Pendle he struggled with the idea that he could be inside someone else's consciousness and feel and see everything that they felt and saw. Unlike John Pendle he luxuriated in its wild eroticism. It tore away the conventional barriers between the sexes and offered a sexual synthesis which passed beyond understanding. And it was one hell of a psychic blast. He now knew intimately what it was like to be a woman being made love to by a man. To have breasts and legs and nipples and a clitoris and feel them being fondled by his own hands, nuzzled by his tongue, penetrated by his own sex. And even more revealing, what it was like to be inside the head and body of a woman making love to another woman. It seemed to him that all of their bodies lost their genders in a fusion of unparalleled lust.

What was even more mind boggling was the awareness that the others in the house were doing same thing with a radiated energy which was almost demonic in its intensity. He could feel the insatiable Mike Throckmorton floating in mid air with Lucy and Imogen, their sinuous bodies weaving around each other like playful dolphins in a weightless sexual ballet. Marcus and Sophie and Caroline and Drew and Sonja and the ghost of Yasmine Allam, all together in the same bed, loving each other with such gentle passion that it made his mind weep, and then talking incessantly about the world they would create if tonight's plan succeeded. Hilary and James, softly tearful in each other's arms, Nikos and Yesha and Amethyst, who had learned a new and different skill, floating in mid air, but changing shape and form and twining round each other. Now snakes, now panthers, now dolphins, now naked humans who were not human. John Pendle and his own daughter, trawling through time and space in search of answers. All of them locked into each other's bodies and minds, floating in another dimension. All celebrating death in the only way they knew how. By affirming the primal energies of life.

When the dream ended Wavell pulled a silk dressing gown round his emaciated body and followed the naked Puck and Tinkerbell down the staircase to the great dining room for a late and sombre Christmas Dinner conjured out of thin air by a magic beyond his comprehension. Later, after more metaphysical debate which led inexorably to only one conclusion, the grieving angels retreated to the Drawing Room on the first floor where they arranged themselves in a circle on an intricately woven Persian rug and prepared to die. The strongest of the telepaths, Mike and Lucy, Marcus and Sophie, Nikos and Yesha, and Drew, temporarily forsaking a reluctant Sonja for the more potent Seraphina, formed themselves into the spokes of the circle of lust Wavell had read about in Mike Throckmorton's report. Only this time there were four spokes forming a simple cross inside the circle. Wavell lowered his aching body into a wing chair by the fire place and prepared to witness the end of the world.

"Join the circle Wavell," voices whispered in his mind. Wavell reluctantly left the security of the chair, slipped out of the dressing gown, and knelt down between Puck and Tinkerbell. They smiled at him encouragingly and held out their hands. *"Now it begins,"* the legion of minds whispered silently.

The room was in darkness except for a log fire which burned brightly in the large grate, casting flickering shadows which licked lasciviously over the divine bodies gathered in front of the flames. Nothing was said, but waves of melancholy rippled round their minds like the dying echoes of a stone cast into a pool of infinite space. Then they held hands and allowed their heads to sink forwards into an irreversible trance. Wavell felt himself falling into an intense whiteness. In the background, remote and distant, he could hear the insistent metronomic beat of his failing heart. The sound stretched out to infinity. Tick Tock. Then he felt the minds of the others. Calm now, and committed. Purged of all passion. They swirled around each other weaving complex patterns of light and colour into a multidimensional tapestry of unbelievable complexity and awesome symmetry. Wavell felt the mind of a living computer embossed on time itself, then the soul of Seraphina, taking his mind and leading it to the others, pulling him into a ball of white flame which inexplicably popped out of time so that he was inside it, looking at a vast pinhead of stygian sky dotted with innumerable stars. The pulsating ball of light which embraced him fell towards one of the pin prick stars. It turned into a cold black sun which sucked them into its centre. Then he felt the full power of the multiple orgasm. It flowed out from the spokes like sheet lightning and blasted through the circle. *"Now."*

Lucy's thoughts overrode all other thoughts. *"The dreams of death are eternal. Come and see."*

Wavell was gripped by a collective orgasm so powerful that it flung his consciousness into the mind of his remotest ancestor. He stared in astonishment at a smaller circle of golden brown bodies locked in the same orgasmic fusion as his new friends. And even more astonishment at the nubile body of the ancestor whose consciousness he now shared.

"Welcome, old friend," the ancestor whispered.

Wayne Kraitmann hefted his Heckler & Koch machine pistol, glanced over his shoulder at what was left of his troop, and, on Ormen Lange's signal, pushed open the large front door into Croxton Hall. His left shoulder was still bleeding from gash made by a carving knife. The peasants in the cottage had fought with ferocious tenacity, even the woman, and had taken them completely by surprise. What had seemed at first like an army of shambling Neanderthal yokels resolved itself eventually into one mishapen lump with its face stove in by a convenient fire iron, and an unbelievably ancient creature, only barely recognisable as a human, which fought with demonic strength until they pinned it to the floor and plunged a hunting knife into its heart, at which point it vanished into a twisting vortex of shining black dust. No sooner had they downed the two males than the woman had hurled herself at them, slashing open the face of Wolf Manitou and gashing Kraitmann's shoulder. Eventually they had subdued her, beat the shit out of her, then tied her down across the kitchen table, and did what they usually did to women. When they'd finished they cut her throat.

Lange was right. The things were not human. They really were up against demonic supernatural forces which had already cost Kraitmann two of his men to weapons improvised from agricultural tools wielded with superhuman determination. When Ormen Lange and Greg Barbas eventually arrived they surveyed the blood drenched room and were not pleased.

"They were waiting for us," Kraitmann argued, "they knew we were coming. Fucking degenerates. Fucking demons."

"Where are the bodies?" Lange demanded.

Kraitmann gestured towards the back door, "in the yard," he muttered.

Lange opened the door and shone his torch round the walled back garden.

"Where?"

Kraitmann stuck his round the door.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered, "they were right there. Right there."

“Well they’re not there now.” Lange stuck the muzzle of his automatic under Kraitmann’s chin. “Are you telling me the truth? Shit for brains.”

Kraitmann nodded enthusiastically, “you were right,” he mumbled, “fucking witches.”

Lange lowered his pistol. Kraitmann and his associates would not survive this mission. But he was now more than ever certain that they were dealing with Satan’s spawn. And now they were about to enter the witches’ coven.

Downstairs was dark and deserted. In the great dining room the long table was strewn with the remains of the last supper. Kraitmann kept having an uneasy sensation that shadows were flitting round corners, just out of his sight. They crept silently up the grand staircase and positioned themselves in the corridor outside the drawing room. The door was very slightly open and through it they could just make out the reflection of an unearthly pale blue luminescence, flickering like moon shadows. Kraitmann pressed gently against the door and stepped gingerly into the room. It was as dark as the other rooms they had checked, except for the dying embers of a log fire in a large ornate fireplace, and the curious blue glow just visible at the periphery of their vision. He shone his torch around the room. It was large. Most of the furniture had been moved back against the walls and in the vacant space in front of the fire was a circle of fourteen people, naked, male and female, kneeling, hands joined, heads bowed to chests, silent and apparently unaware of the lethal interlopers. And in the middle a four pronged star of bewitchingly beautiful women, each bent backwards on the thighs of a man, stretched out like spokes in a wheel. Their hands were clasped together behind their heads to form an inner wheel, their eyes closed, their mouths wide open in a paroxysm of ecstasy. An ephemeral blue haze flickered round each body, curling around the circle like ghostly wings.

“The fuckers are in here,” Kraitmann turned to Lange, “we’re in luck dudes. There’s a fucking orgy. The boys are here, babes. Wakey wakey babes. Time to get laid.” The rest of the squad burst into the room, weapons levelled. Greg Barbas found the light switch by the door. The room flooded with light, revealing the naked bodies in all their beauty. Still they did not come out of their trance. Kraitmann’s breath was taken away by the women.

“Kill the women,” Lange shouted, “now, you stupid fucker. Waste them now. For God’s sake!”

“My God,” Kraitmann murmured, “I’m not wasting them. They’re fucking beautiful. I’ve never seen pussy like that. Shit me. They’re all

so fucking beautiful.”

“They look like angels,” Barbas whispered in awe.

“Kill the women,” Ormen Lange snarled again, “now!! Do it. You stupid bastard.”

Kraitmann hesitated, paralysed by the promises radiating from the seductive flesh. The others looked at him, waiting for him to confirm the order to fire. But they too were falling under the siren spell. He realised with astonishment that he had a massive erection, so rock hard that it was painful, and its message overwhelmed all other imperatives. He looked at his colleagues who were similarly paralysed by lust.

The circle of bodies on the floor did not move. Barbas leaned over one of them and checked for a pulse in the carotid artery. He shook his head and looked up at Lange .

“They’re already dead,” he murmured. He tested another body. “This one too. They’re all dead. It’s Jonestown all over again. They’ve fucking well killed themselves. It’s just a stupid cult, for Christ’s sake.”

Barbas moved around the circle checking each of the vacant bodies. He recognised Ayesha Quatermain pinned to her effeminate husband and stretched back into the centre of the circle. Their eyes were closed. Ayesha was so small and delicate, like some exotic oriental flower. Barbas stood still, leaned down and tested the pulse. There was nothing there. But the skin was warm to the touch. Whatever they had done to themselves it was very recent.

Kraitmann followed him. He too stopped at Ayesha. He remembered torturing her and for the first time in his life he felt guilty for what he had done. He looked more closely at Nikos, remembering the burning flesh. He recoiled in astonishment.

“He’s fucking intact,” he gasped, “I fucking burned his dick off. Look at him. He’s fucking her.” He followed Barbas round the outside of the circle, peering into each face until he came to the startling blonde, impaled on Mike Throckmorton’s massive penis.

“Jeez,” he muttered, “look at that dude’s dick.”

Ormen Lange was also inspecting the bodies in the circle. Most of them had unfamiliar faces, except for Drew Quatermain and his exotic model wife. But one face was instantly familiar.

“Wavell, you asshole,” he shouted, “you’re supposed to be dead. Well you’re fucking dead now. Fucking traitor.”

Wavell woke as the bullet tore into his chest. He tried to release his hands from Puck and Tinkerbelle. But they were still frozen in time and could not let him go. His dying soul reverberated round the Circle, sharing its lethal message and bringing them all back to life in order to be reborn. Wavell returned alone to that transcendental world,

irrevocably torn out of a dying body and catapulted back into the remote consciousness he had just left. The two minds merged into one. Wavell and his ancestral alter ego knew at once what they must do.

"And you must be fucking Throckmorton," Lange snarled, remembering a poor photograph from a personnel file, "you fucking turncoat. Kill them Kraitmann," his voice was flint sharp with terror, "kill them. Now!!"

Lucy's eyes opened. Her head came up. She looked straight up into Kraitmann's eyes and lost her temper. Kraitmann was neither evil nor good. Kraitmann had no soul. Kraitmann was the beast who had raped Yesha and mutilated Nikos. And now his consciousness reeked with fresh blood and exulted in the promise of more rape and death.

No!! Lucy, No!! The waking Caroline screamed into her daughter's brain. Lucy tapped into Mike's expectant energy and converted it into blazing rage.

"You killed Fangdale," a female voice roared in Kraitmann's brain, *"and Claire. And all those others. So many. Human monsters."*

"Don't kill them Lucy. You mustn't kill. We cannot kill." Caroline's mind was simultaneously imperative and imploring. *"Don't kill them. You will die yourself."*

"I don't think so," Lucy flashed back, *"and I'm not going kill him. On the contrary I'm going to keep him alive."*

"They're not dead," Kraitmann yelled "They're fucking witch zombies." He levelled the Heckler at the two bodies transfixed by love but the gun jammed. He stepped back in astonishment. They were no longer there. They were standing upright in the centre of the Circle, as naked as Adam and Eve, hand in hand, staring at him. He screamed with rage and terror and pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened.

Mike's willing power surged through Lucy.

A bolt of invisible lightning hurled Kraitmann across the room then crucified him against the wall. He hung there silently watching himself hammer nails through his own wrists and ankles. He tried to scream with the excruciating pain but his muscles were paralysed. His eyes stood out on stalks. His mouth was open and slack. His body motionless. But inside his consciousness a seething cauldron of pain exploded with sulphurous fury. Every torture he had ever inflicted came back from his darkest memories to haunt him. Every lingering death pursued his soul with unendurable pain. He begged to die but there was no escape. The blonde witch extracted everything he had ever done and made him live through every facet of his own evil, inflicted on him now by his own hands. He looked himself in the eye as he plunged a electric drill into it. He felt the blood spurting, bone splitting savagery of the

chain saw as he severed his own legs and arms. He watched himself slit open his stomach and strangle himself with his own intestines. He squealed like a pig as he cut off his penis slice by slow slice and stuffed his severed testicles into his mouth. But most of all he felt the pain and terror of the rape and degradation he had so often inflicted on the soft bodies of so many women. He felt what it was like to have cigars stubbed out on his nipples. He felt the gun barrel in the vagina. The razor in the throat. The nipples slit from shrieking bodies, the incessant gang rape, the remorseless beatings. And finally he held the blowtorch to his groin and screamed with unendurable pain. He died a thousand times in an instant. And each time, like the tormented souls in a medieval hell, he was reborn to devour himself again.

"Lucy," Mike murmured, *"Lucy. Compassion. He has suffered enough. Let him die."*

"No" Lucy replied, *"I will let him live to remember what he has done. He will be dead anyway within the next few minutes. But not by me."*

She allowed Kraitmann to fall to the floor. The mind that returned to the paralysed body twitched and blubbered and squirmed in terror.

Ormen Lange looked at Kraitmann with contempt. "I warned you," he yelled, "you dumb fucker. I warned you. Kill the broads. That's what I said. You didn't fucking listen." He levelled the Glock and pulled the trigger. Kraitmann was allowed one final insane howl. Then he died. His departing soul slithered round the Circle and vanished into a flash of darkness.

Lange hesitated then pointed the Glock at Lucy's forehead. Lucy smiled at him, as though provoking him to do his worst. He turned towards Drew who was still locked into the reclining Seraphina.

"Talk to me Quatermain," he barked, "you goddam degenerate. Tell me what I want to hear."

"I have nothing to say to you," Drew replied quietly.

"I mean it," Lange shouted, "tell me about the bio-weapon....or..," he gestured at Lucy with pistol.

"I don't think so," Drew's mind whispered silently inside Lange's head. *"You can't kill us. And we can't kill you. But if you try to kill us you will give us powers beyond your imagination. Try to kill us, human."*

Ormen Lange recoiled in horror at the alien intrusion into his consciousness. He pulled the trigger and blinked at the muzzle flash. The bullet ploughed through the witch's face and blew her brains through the back of her head. That was what he expected to see, but not what he actually saw. He blinked again. The witch vanished then

reappeared. Intact, shamelessly naked, nakedly defenceless, smiling a smile of utter derision.

“What the hell?” Lange stepped further back and stared disbelievingly at the smoking gun.

Lucy and Mike walked slowly towards him. Lange levelled the Glock at her heart but could not pull the trigger. He stared in petrified astonishment at the naked woman walking resolutely into the jaws of death. She stopped at an arm’s length in front of him. He brought his arm up and pointed the Glock at her forehead. She was beautiful. So beautiful. A golden angel. He felt something click in the back of his consciousness. Strange tendrils of ultramarine light wove themselves into his mind. The witch was deep inside his head. Lange tried to pull the trigger but his body was no longer connected to his mind.

Lucy sifted through endless layers of darkness until she reached the truth and when she did she recoiled with such horror that her terror howled round the Circle. Caroline had been wrong. They had all been wrong. Evil really was a cosmic force as powerful and malign as their cosmic consciousness was benign. Locked into the transient lives of humans. Imprisoned and raging in their mortal souls. It was trapped in time and unremittingly hostile to all forms of life. And it knew that if Drew’s system reset succeeded its willing human hosts would never be born and it would be expelled forever from the Eden it had destroyed. Lucy stepped back into Lange’s conscious mind and sensed a more immediate threat which she transmitted to the others.

Seraphina screamed with horror when she saw what Lucy had seen. She looked up expectantly at Drew. *“Go to Iceland,”* Drew commanded her, *“now! Connect with them. Then follow Lucy and Mike. We must not lose them.”* Seraphina’s mind merged briefly with Lucy, then she vanished, leaving Drew kneeling between Caroline and Sonja.

“Get out of my fucking head you fucking witch!!” Lange snarled, trying unsuccessfully to pull the trigger. The dark force which Lucy had found inside him fought back. In the instant that Lucy was distracted by Seraphina he shifted his aim to the right and shot Mike Throckmorton in the heart, then shook his own head in blind disbelief. Throckmorton had also vanished in a ripple of invisible energy. He returned the Glock to Lucy’s forehead but could not pull the trigger.

“What in hell are you?” Ormen Lange croaked through a throat paralysed with fear. The harsh presbyterian face paled. Terror gripped him. This was not what they had come for. “What in hell are you?”

Lucy looked into the impassive eyes of the ancient tiger, felt the stench of its hot breath, sensed its implacable hunger. *“Witches, warlocks. Your ancestral anathema. Remember us?”* she whispered.

Ormen blinked in astonishment. Then he brought his eyes back to Lucy. "I don't believe in witches," he hissed.

"Then why do you want to kill us," she whispered in his brain, "if you don't believe in us."

Lange hesitated. He felt his body released from the spell. He squeezed the trigger. The witch vanished.

"Kill the witch," she whispered again inside his brain. Lange wheeled round. The witch was standing behind him. He fired again. Once again the witch vanished.

"Now do you believe?"

Lange twisted to the right. She was in front of him again. He levelled the Glock at her forehead then hesitated. "If you have these powers," he said, "why don't you kill me?"

"Because we can't kill. That's what makes us unhuman. It is humans who can kill each other. We cannot. But if you want to kill us you will have to believe in us." A different voice. Lange turned and turned again. Mike Throckmorton was standing behind him.

"I believe in the lord God and all his Angels, and Jesus Christ our saviour," Lange gibbered, "and I believe that you are creatures of Satan." In desperation his left hand searched in his waistcoat pocket for the small crucifix which he always carried to remind him of his faith. He thrust it defiantly into Lucy's face and started to pray.

"I don't think so," Lucy replied, *"he was one of us. You killed him too. But if you believe in a supernatural God, it should not be difficult for you to believe in supernatural witches. So believe in us and then do as you always do. Kill the witches. All of them. Do it now. Before they kill you!"*

Wavell's last breath rattled from his throat. His soul left his body. Its dying strength resonated round the circle, empowering it with the irresistible force of death. The force of an unconditional love which united all of the telepaths strong enough to receive the final summons. Mike and Lucy had a crystal clear vision of the phantom circle they had just left and only an instant to leap to it. Nine sinewy brown bodies. Three men, six women, locked together in a Square of Three. A star within a circle. Their minds reached out to their remote descendants and created a psychic highway to a single beacon standing alone, far outside the circle, waiting for them.

"Now, Lucy!" Mike's urgent mind intervened, *"the path is open. Do it now Lucy. Turn the key. Let them go!"*

Lucy gasped as ineffable energy flowed through her from Mike and surged round the waiting Circle. She focussed a tiny fraction of the force onto Lange's crucifix transforming it into molten silver. *"Now you*

know the truth," she whispered to him; "it is not us. It is you. Humans are the children of darkness. Not us. Now you can kill us."

The molten crucifix seared its image into Lange's palm. He dropped his pistol and clutched at his left hand, doubled up with the pain. "Fuck you!" he screamed, "you Godless abominations. Fuck you all. Go back to Hell. Waste them, you dumb bastards. Waste them all!"

The patriot boys, suddenly released by Lucy from their excruciating erections, cocked their weapons and emptied them into the Circle of soft bodies. But there were no screams of terror. No eviscerated bodies erupting in fountains of blood. No bullet shattered bones. The naked Circle had already imploded into a blinding flash of energy and vanished into another world.

When Lange recovered his sight Throckmorton and the blonde witch had disappeared. All of them had disappeared, except for the crumpled pathetic body of Wavell Meredith, stretched out on his back, smiling a smile of enigmatic satisfaction.

"Fuck you!" Lange yelled again. He picked up the Heckler that Kraitmann had dropped. "And you assholes saw nothing," he snapped at the four incredulous soldiers, then loosed off the remains of the Heckler magazine into them before they had time to think what it was that they had not seen.

"Was that necessary?" Barbas asked, "for Christ's sake! We didn't get what we came for. I thought we were supposed to negotiate."

"We got what we came for," he snarled, "they're dead aren't they?"

"Then where are the bodies?" the ever practical Barbas enquired, "they wanted you to kill them didn't they. Why? I wonder if they were real." He paused for thought, "or...maybe...they were just holograms...or something."

"Of course they were fucking real. Now we know the truth. There really is a God and there really is a Devil. And we are on the wrong fucking side. No one else must ever know. Especially you. You ask too many fucking questions." He shot Greg Barbas in the chest, then staggered backwards and leaned against the wall. He was panting. His heart was thumping like jackhammer. He flung the empty Heckler at the remains of his soldiers and stalked out of Croxton Hall.

Snow flecked shadows cast by a sullen gibbous moon licked furtively around the darkness of the Hall. In the West the sky was lit up with cascading folds of shimmering blue and green aurora bringing down the final curtain on the unremitting tragedy of humanity.

Ormen Lange flicked open the cellphone to confirm the execution of the attack on the underwater hotel. The phone was dead. He looked up at the magnificent aurora of charged particles swirling round the dark

sky like a luminous shroud. It was in the wrong compass point.

"EMP," he muttered, "no fucking communications." He shivered, subconsciously sensing the lethal radiation sleeting through him. He checked his watch. The US Navy frigate stationed off Iceland should by now have completed the depth charge run on Quatermain's underwater hotel. Quatermain was no longer a threat to humanity.

But the hotel was empty. The telepaths had transported themselves, following Seraphina who had appeared amongst them in the last instant before their deaths and summoned them to meet their ancestors. Lange turned and looked at the Hall. The Hall flickered and momentarily vanished. The sky went black. No misplaced *aurora occidentalis*. No stars. No moon. Then the snow draped mansion reappeared, shimmering white in the silver jewelled light of a newly full moon. Drew Quatermain and the blonde witch and another woman appeared in the doorway. Ormen turned and walked towards them, fumbling for his hand gun, but his legs were weighed down as though he was running through viscous black quicksand which sucked the life out of him. The darkness of his dying soul erased him from the light. His last memory was of Quatermain looking at him with an expression of grave regret, and of the others reappearing out of thin air. All of those who had been in that erotic circle, and the accusatory mind of Wavell Meredith, clothed now in the body of brown skinned young woman, reaching reproachfully into his fading consciousness to remind him of mankind's failure. And Others. Many Others, some of whom were not quite human.

"Goodbye," the blonde witch's mind whispered, "*the age of men never happened. The age of the Elves never ended. You are not dying. You were never born. You have never existed.*"

CHAPTER 26

Lucy staggered to her feet. A lukewarm sun shone in a cloudless sky but the air was cool. She shivered slightly, then looked over her shoulder. She was standing at the edge of the familiar Circle which seconds ago had been kneeling in the drawing room at Croxton Hall when the machine guns had unleashed their gift of death. Around the outside of the circle a mass of naked flesh, flopped onto the soft grass like so many beached fish. Thousands of bodies wrenched out of one world and dropped unceremoniously into another at the moment when Lange's depth charges had shattered their underwater refuge and death had deluged in upon them. They too were struggling to their feet and looking around in astonishment.

Behind them were squat limestone cliffs divided by a torrential waterfall which thundered into a small lake. On either side of the lake the cliffs were pockmarked with innumerable cave entrances. In front of them, about a mile away, was a semicircle of coniferous trees, birch and spruce, which shielded the open area around the caves from whatever lay beyond. Standing in the middle of them was Seraphina, speaking to their minds, also cascading a torrent of hope and reassurance to their disorientated souls.

Beyond the newcomers was a smaller circle, a Square of Three, now also rising to its feet to greet the newcomers. Mike extended his hand to Lucy and helped Imogen to her feet. Hand in hand the three of them walked forward to meet the female who had acted as the psychic beacon for Lucy's leap into the unknown past. The mind which now greeted them was familiar. Part of it was the extremely confused and disorientated mind of Wavell Meredith which, to Seraphina's intense relief had found a home, though not one that Wavell might have expected. The other part was the mind of the female whose body Lucy and Mike had shared in those exploratory psychic excursions from their rooms at Keele. The Others and their Neanderthal companions were all here, what was left of them, gathered in the ancestral meeting place. Waiting to greet them with love. And amongst the Neanderthals Imogen sensed the souls of the young Fangdale, and of Claire, transported by death to the time of their birth. But of his ancient and angelic father there was no sign. The reunion of the many bodies of the one soul was ecstatic in every sense.

"What now?" Caroline asked when the gifts of love had been exhausted and the givers of love lay sated in the lush grass.

"We start to build our world," Drew replied, *"beginning with*

creating food, shelter and clothing for the three thousand souls who have come with us, and those who are still to come. That will be easy. Given our psitech replication skills we can make anything we need." He stopped and looked around, *"but what we especially need is some form of aircraft because until we can get up into the air we will have no idea exactly where we are."*

"Aircraft?" Mike asked, *"I thought we had left that technology behind for good."*

"Not aircraft, exactly." Drew replied, *"Our lives are going to be itinerant, but we can only jump to places or people we already know. We need some means of aerial transport for exploration. Back in Iceland our bioengineers were experimenting with an organic machine that will harness our psychic energy to fly, just as you can. Now they can put their dreams into practice. Literally."*

Caroline started to laugh, and allowed herself to float, *"don't tell me,"* she chortled, *"a broomstick? A magic carpet?"*

"Or a bird?" said Yesha, turning herself into a large owl and soaring effortlessly into the clear sky. But all she could see was the great plain behind the cliffs, bounded in the North by the white rim of a distant glacier. She circled round. In every Southerly point of the compass all that was visible was an endless plain dotted with vast forests which disappeared into the haze of a purple horizon. Nothing was familiar. She transmitted what she saw to those on the ground, then returned to earth and resumed her familiar shape.

"Well done, my clever daughter," Drew was laughing as well now, *"that is going to be a very useful skill. But for long distances we need something bigger, a sentient organic machine which can levitate and fly and protect us from the elements. A mobile habitat. A kind of flying caravan. Seraphina, when are we? And where are we?"*

"According to the Altair computer," Seraphina joined them, *"Mike and Lucy have taken us back roughly forty thousand years. And we're somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere. But without any familiar point of reference the computer cannot tell us exactly where we are. Remember, it sees only what we see. You're right. We will have to explore until we find some geographical feature we can recognise. The Altair computer can extrapolate from that, correlate it with adjusted star positions, and then we can begin to construct a global navigation grid."*

"Then we definitely need a flying carpet of some kind," Drew pondered for a while, *"because the sooner we can find them the sooner we can do what has to be done. They have already left Africa, but, according to our ancestors, they are only just beginning to get here, wherever here is. So we have plenty of time to prepare. We know the*

pattern of dispersal. They go out of Africa along the Saudi coast and up the Persian Gulf towards India. Initially on foot. Then they will learn how to build simple boats. We will watch and wait for them in strategic places. Somewhere on the coast of Sudan would be appropriate. If we're right about when we are, then the Bab-el-Mandeb strait at the mouth of the Red Sea will be so narrow that it can be crossed with a reed raft. That's the point at which they turn North up to the Middle East and Europe, or East to India. And some of us will go to Africa and Asia to spread our seed there. Any we encounter we will greet with love. These are primitive creatures who are quite willing to believe that Gods and Goddesses can come to earth and mate with them. It should not be difficult. And we look for other communities of telepaths and introduce ourselves to them. The Altair computer can do that easily enough, and that will also provide us with more topographic information."

"But is it right to play God?" John Pendle asked, still troubled by the remnants of a Christian conscience and remembering another God who had come to Earth to mate with a human.

Drew shrugged, *"I think we have no option. This way is painless. For them. Maybe not so painless for us because we may always feel guilty at what we've done. Our atonement must be to make a much better world than they did."* Drew relaxed and looked round at the limestone escarpment behind them. *"Actually"* he said, *"this looks a little like Boxgrove might have been forty thousand years ago. We could be on the South coast of England. If we have gone back forty thousand years we should be in the middle of the Devensian ice age. The Channel will not have formed yet. We could probably walk to France, but North of us there could be glaciers at least to Cheshire."*

"There was an interstadial in Britain in the Mid Devensian," Wavell volunteered, *"round about forty two to thirty eight thousand BP. That would explain the mild climate. It won't last. The winters will be very cold indeed. Sooner or later we will have to move South towards the sun."*

"How do you know this?" Seraphina looked questioningly at the mind of her father.

"Remember, I was once an anthropologist. Geology and anthropology go hand in hand."

"What is an anthropologist?" asked the host whose beautiful body Wavell now shared.

"One who studies the origins of mankind," Wavell was still trying to come to terms with the mystery of being alive and inside the body of an ancient young woman who had accepted the merging of their consciousness with voracious enthusiasm but kept thinking lascivious

thoughts about Mike Throckmorton which Wavell just knew would be consummated within the very near future. How ironic, he tried to think to himself, to be screwed by his ex-employee. His shared consciousness laughed at the thought. She had no name. These telepaths did not need names because they were known to each other by the unique totality of their ancestral consciousness. But, in deference to Wavell and the conventions of the newcomers, she eventually agreed that they would call themselves Vell. It took some considerable time before Wavell abbreviated himself seamlessly into Vell, and it took Seraphina some time to accept that her father was now a woman.

"Mankind?" Vell whispered, *"what is mankind? We have so much to learn. We have forgotten so much,"*

"Well," Wavell replied, *"mankind is"*

"Those creatures of the darkness who come to you with death in their hearts," Drew interjected, *"we have just escaped from mankind. Our first task must be to ensure that it never threatens us again."*

"And after we have emasculated mankind," said James Sinclair, *"what next? Just so I know the story, since it will probably be me that will tell it."*

Drew smiled. *"As I said. We rebuild this world in our image. No gods, no religions, no tribes, no nations, no races or languages to divide us, no money, no greed, no envy, no poverty, no crime, no governments, no war. Only love, and art, and music, and science and reason, and the universe and ourselves to discover and explore."* Drew started to laugh again. *"We have everything we need. Mike and Lucy did brilliantly. All of us did brilliantly. We've regained the formidable psychic powers of the witches and wizards. We have the Altair computer. We have the strongest of our people from Trikos, more than enough males to ensure our survival, we have the wisdom of our ancestors, and the wisdom of our science, and we have the Thals, who are also our ancestors, and all the other hominids who are not men. And we have those who are still to come. Between us we have the power to recreate Eden. And neither god nor man is going to expel us from it. This is our Earth. We are its custodians, not its masters, and, if we care for it, it will abide with us forever."*

"And what are we?" James Sinclair continued, *"if we are not mankind? What do they call themselves?"* He gestured at the circle of golden brown bodies standing reverentially round Drew.

"They call themselves the People of the Place," Lucy replied. The brown bodies nodded and smiled.

"They are Elves" Imogen laughed, *"the Lordly Ones. The fairest and wisest of creatures. And there is the hollow hill,"* she pointed to the

honeycomb of caves at the base of the limestone cliffs, *"and, as Nikos once said; Elves are cool. I'd like us to be Elves."*

"We do not know what we are," Marcus smiled and hugged his darling daughter, *"but, until we find out, Elves will do, as long as they're Tolkein's noble elves and not little people in pointy green hats."* Everyone started to laugh, including the People of the Place, who were not quite sure what the joke was. But the images which Imogen placed in their minds were consistent with how they saw themselves, so they accepted it with good humour.

"Well," John Pendle brought their reveries back to a distant reality, *"not quite forever. Don't forget the Neutron star. Forty thousand years from now."*

"The earth still has to suffer many shocks," Drew replied, *"ice ages, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, climate change, meteors. But we know pretty well what is coming and when, and we can plan for it. There is nothing in the next forty thousand years that is a mortal threat to us, except the neutron star, and we will find a way to neutralise the neutron star. That is for you and Seraphina and Lucy and those like you to consider. You have plenty of time. But first we need simple things, like tea, tents and toilets. And we need to assimilate the wisdom of our ancestors and return our psychic powers to them since it seems that they have forgotten many of the things that we have just learned and we have so many things to learn from them."*

Later, as the blood red sun fell towards the encircling trees, Lucy, Mike and Imogen flew witch like to the edge of the chalk cliff behind the settlement. Hand in hand they looked down at the vast tree studded savannah rolling into the remote horizon. Lucy recognised this place but it was not as she remembered it from the drowning dream on Skiathos. The trickling waterfall had turned into a torrent of glacial melt water which had worn a deep groove in the limestone before plunging into the pool below. Nor was there a dead rhinoceros, or manic simian butchers. And there were no elephants or sabre toothed tigers. But that had been more than three hundred thousand years earlier. Now, beyond the mile deep semicircle of trees which enclosed the poolside settlement, the terrain was more open; mostly grassland, interspersed with large forests of birch and spruce. In the distance she could see herds of deer and horses, and, far away, she could just make out what looked like very large herds of bison, or maybe woolly mammoths. The topography had not changed dramatically but the climate was colder, much colder.

She looked up at the American god standing between her and the spellbound Imogen holding his other hand, her mind wide open with

wonder. Down below them the information cascading outwards to the newcomers from Drew and Seraphina was weaving a canopy the size of a millennium dome from fullerene carbon extracted from the air itself by trillions of nanobots generated by the Altair computer. Far above them the three huge birds which were Ayesha and Amethyst and Nikos soared and wheeled; surveying the horizon for landmarks and talking constantly to the minds of those below.

“Drew Quatermain planned all this,” Mike thought, “he saw it all. The past and the future. He knew exactly what to do.”

Imogen squeezed his hand, “yes,” she murmured, *“this is Drew’s dream. He saw the past and the future and dreamed of how it might be. We are such things as dreams are made on. We are all part of Drew’s dream.”*

“Thanatakis,” Lucy’s mind whispered, “Thanatakis. The Altair Computer. It was Drew. All along. It was Drew.”

The sun was very low now. Lucy shivered and imagined a cloak which materialised miraculously and moulded itself around her slender body. It was true. Everything they could possibly want was carried within themselves; food, clothing, transport, shelter, protection, instantly available at the speed of thought. They need carry no baggage whatsoever. Imogen and Mike followed suit, Imogen replacing her skin with thick white fur which made her look like a snow leopard. Mike chose a red woollen cloak which made him look like a Spartan warrior. In a cold climate there were practical limits to the freedom of nudity, seductive as it might be. Lucy suspected that they would soon move to the warm South. She hoped so. Mike put his arms round their waists. They sat together on the edge of cliff and watched the sun set on an ancient world and the moon rise on a new one.

CHAPTER 27

"They're coming," Lucy pointed at the distant dots which slowly resolved themselves into large reed rafts propelled by bearded men wielding massive paddles.

"Do we have to do this?" Lucy asked, *"again?"* She looked questioningly at her mother who seemed more gorgeous now than she had ever seen her. Here the nakedness that they had once privately enjoyed in that distant other life was the norm. Caroline was in her element; tall, bronzed and athletic, just like Lucy, standing with her legs slightly apart, her hand shielding her eyes from the baking sun, looking out to sea. There were other women on the beach, most of the rest of the Circle and some of the grateful ancestors who had welcomed them into their lives and now shared their enhanced DNA. The men, however, had realigned their molecular structure and made themselves invisible. But they were here, standing beside the women. And concealed in the dunes behind the beach was the mobile geodesic globe fabricated by psitech from self replicating cells and propelled by the same psychic forces which allowed the Elves to levitate and fly. And since it was grafted into living DNA it could also teleport itself if need be.

But because they were no longer constrained by time the Elves did not hurry, unless they had too. Amongst the many things they had learned from their sapient ancestors was the ability to enter the minds of animals and talk to them. So now it was more interesting to walk through their world, as their ancestors had done, and to listen to the animals with whom they shared the abundant Earth. They did not judge the world of the animals, though they themselves no longer needed to kill to eat. But they cared for their needs and helped them through death, and, in return, the animals spoke to their minds and became their eyes and ears in the wild world. All save one. The minds of men could not talk to animals. They could not even talk to each other. And knowing that they were not telepaths enraged them beyond measure.

"We don't have any option," Caroline replied, *"we have already been here for over a thousand years. It's taken a lot longer than we thought. We have watched them in the hope that they might be redeemed. But they are just as they will always be. We cannot share this world with them. They will not tolerate us. They can't kill us unless they catch us off guard, but they will always want to try. And we can't kill them. Therefore we will always be on guard. Better that we give ourselves to them, as we agreed. They enjoy us and then they will forget that we exist. And they will never return. This should be the last time."*

So let's do it and get it over with."

Lucy and Imogen could feel the reassuring presence of Mike between them. His hands reached for their hands and squeezed them in reassurance. *"We won't let them harm you. Just do what you like doing best."*

The primitive reed boats rolled in to the shore and beached themselves. They were the apex of a nascent technology; reed rafts bound together with papyrus ropes; crude craft which would never evolve into a nuclear submarine. The men leapt out and walked cautiously up the beach towards the rows of naked women passively waiting for them. They could not believe their luck. These females were physically like their own women, but more beautiful than them. And best of all there were no men to defend them. The primal instinct engrossed them. They threw down their spears and tore off their loincloths. Imogen was grabbed by her shoulders and hurled onto the baking hot sand. She lay back, stretched out her arms and legs into a seductive saltire and smiled sweetly at the ravening monster about to crucify himself on her. He raped her swiftly and clumsily and then withdrew panting, wondering angrily why the ecstasy of sex was so fleeting. It was always like this, all over before it had begun.

He flung himself off her and lay on his back looking at the sky and listening to his companions doing what he had just done. Only this time it was different. There were no tearful anguished screams. These women were strangely compliant, compared with the women of the other tribes they had met in their travels. He preferred women who fought back so that he had an excuse to beat them into howling submission. And where were the males? Sacrificing the males to the Gods of the Sky was a divine duty. It gave them spiritual strength. If there were no males to sacrifice at least one of these females would have to die in their place. It would be a sinful waste of willing flesh.

"Who are you?" he grunted, rolling onto his side and kneading Imogen's breasts with clumsy calloused fingers, "you are not like the"

Imogen winced. The language was unintelligible to her, but the thoughts which shaped his words were not, and the image he framed in his coarse mind was that of a Neanderthal woman. She replied in images which formed themselves in his mind as the words of his own primitive language modulated so that they seemed to him like normal speech..

"We are the Λωτοφάγοι. The priestesses of the Goddess of the Moon. Daughter of the God of the Sun."

The man grunted and fingered his languid penis which was wet with his own semen and the infective juices of Imogen's vagina. He licked

his fingers to taste the essence of this strange woman. The fate of man was already sealed.

"This place is sacred to the Goddess of the Moon," Imogen whispered obligingly, "you must forget this place. You must never come here again, any of you. Never again. The Gods of the Sky are angered by your treatment of the people of this place and will punish you. The people of this place are children of the Gods. You must serve your Gods. They have a mission for you."

"I am a servant of the Gods," the man gabbled, suddenly aware that he was in the presence of the sacred, astonished that this divine creature could speak in words he understood and aware of a vengeful fire blazing in his guilty imagination, "what is your will priestess?"

"We have given our bodies to you as a reward for your faith. Now you must go into every land and spread the word of the Gods of the Sky."

"What is the word, priestess?"

Imogen traced her fingers down the man's genitals.

"The word is love. Love one another." She planted in the crude creature's mind an image of such erotic immediacy that he could be in no doubt what was expected of him.

"Go forth and multiply," she murmured, "spread your seed upon the women of the earth. Do to them as you have done to me. And do it with love, not pain."

The man looked at the divine body and prostrated himself before her, then stood up and retreated back towards the boats. His companions joined him, backing away from the bodies they had just enjoyed and the revelation of divine love which would spell the end of their species. They grouped together at the bow of one of the reed boats. Imogen stood up and felt Mike's invisible hand grip her arm and his soul embrace her. Lucy stood silent on the other side.

"It's done," Mike tightened his grip, "but they're not sure. Humans need miracles before they can believe. Wait."

The creatures by the boat looked back and wondered whether to believe what they had all been told by these bewitching women. These female priestesses were not like the women who they had customarily raped and enslaved. They were lighter skinned and their faces were different. Sharper, more intelligent, more determined, more dangerous. Doubt gripped them. Perhaps they really were priestess of the Goddess of Moon. The mysterious and inconstant Moon. His people worshipped the Sun. Perhaps they were false, like the Moon. Perhaps they were witches. Perhaps it would be better to enslave them. There would be glory in that and wealth. And tales to be told around the fire. They

picked up their spears and began to advance back up the beach. The woman he had raped was standing next to another female, strange beyond belief, with bronze gold skin and long golden white hair, unlike anything he had ever seen before, and in the secret place no hair at all. Their hands were held out towards each other but did not meet so that they seemed to be clasping thin air. Thin air which erupted into a ball of livid white flame curling and twisting into the shape of a blazing God with wings of fire. It towered over them. The heat seared their flesh.

"The God of the Sun," they screamed hurling themselves into the sand and trying to bury themselves in it to escape the wrath of their God. When they dared to look up again the beach was empty. On the close horizon, just beyond the dunes, a golden sphere floated into view, hung motionless for a moment and then disappeared into the sky faster than the blink of an eye. The Sun God had left in his celestial craft, taking the priestesses with him and leaving these doomed representatives of *homo sapiens sapiens* convinced of their divine mission.

They too left in haste, paddling furiously back to their camp further along the coast, to the enslaved women, human and Neanderthal, waiting patiently to be raped again for the increase of the tribe. In time the tribe would move on along the coast, killing the men of other tribes where it could and taking their women for rape and trade. They themselves would die in some casual skirmish, but the contagious women and their contagious daughters would be taken by others and traded on, deeper and deeper into the world of men until the world of men had raped itself into extinction.

"Really, Imogen," Sophie lounged back in the soft seat of the geodesic flier and watched the Himalayas flash past below her, "*sometimes I wonder about you. Λωτοφάγοι. You know what Λωτοφάγοι means, don't you.*"

"Of course I do," Imogen replied, "*Lotus Eaters, I thought it was rather clever of me. And what about Mike, turning himself into a fireball?*"

"It was like a bad day at Hogwarts," Lucy laughed. She rolled over and cuddled herself into Mike and Imogen.

CHAPTER 28

Drew Quatermain stood beside Lucy and Sonja on the snow covered steps of Croxton Hall and looked up at the night sky. It was not the original Hall of course. That had never existed. But after the last of the ice ages they had returned to the North and rebuilt the Hall from the images stored in the memory of the Altair computer. It was identical in all respects to the Croxton Hall they had once known, quite unlike the organic domes and aerial pavilions genetically fabricated for them by the nanobots, and it sat alone within the great forest which covered most of an empty England.

In spite of its isolation from the main settlements around the Mediterranean, Hilary and James lived more or less permanently at the Hall, together with a small community of Thals who cared for the gardens and the animals and listened with wrapt devotion to James's elaborate stories of times past and future. They were not out of touch, of course, and could teleport in the blink of an eye to any place on this earth or on the few habitable planets they had found in their exploration of the galaxy. But mostly they stayed at Croxton and were content to walk or ride through the deep forests whilst others of their species roamed restlessly amongst the stars in a vain search for the god within themselves.

Those others returned to the Hall from time to time, and every Christmas, to celebrate an event which had never happened. This Christmas day was different. This was the day when they had left the world of men and men had left the world of nature. The day to which they were bound to return by their inexorable passage through material time. The day when the earth would either live or die.

Mike Throckmorton and Imogen materialised beside them, together with Marcus, flanked, as always, by Sophie and Caroline. The others were not far behind. They had regenerated their bodies many times but their souls were transmitted intact down countless generations and in each incarnation they had remained true to their original characters and physical forms. They were as they had always been. They stood silently beside their companions, looking up at the sky. With them came the descendants of the Thals, almost indistinguishable now from the demi gods who had interbred with them, and other species of hominid whose previous ancestors had not survived the hands of men.

The first flickers of the livid aurora flared up in the western sky.

Lucy shivered as an echo of a parallel present transected her. The echo of all the evil that had once been irrational man, concentrated into

one fleeting soul fading into the darkness. *Goodbye*, she thought sadly, *the age of men never happened. The age of the Elves never ended. You are not dying. You were never born. You have never existed.* Then it was gone, like the shards of a shattered nightmare.

They held hands and looked up at the constant moon which bathed them all in the silver light it shared with the sun. For nearly forty thousand years a reborn race of telepaths had learned how to will the moon to change its orbit by carefully adjusting the gravity well which pinned it to the Earth. Now the moon was exactly where they had willed it to be, shielding the Earth from the lethal effects of a massive burst of tightly focussed gamma radiation, the dragon's breath of dying stars. For twelve seconds the silver rim of the Moon was encircled by a flickering white corona caused by the scattering of the shielded gamma rays into lower energy radiation which dissipated harmlessly into space. The system reset was complete. Paradise had been regained.

But deep in the darkness of forgotten forests the eternal serpent twitched the scaly horror of his coiled tail, and dreamed of primordial Eve.

