

THE IPAT EQUATION

by Barti Cox

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INTRODUCTION

This is a republishing of, The EADUN Directive, under a new name.

The story begins in the year 2011. Sironka, a Maasai boy of exceptional abilities, is adopted by a wealthy English couple and, after a successful university education, he becomes embroiled in humanity's desperate struggle for power and survival across three continents in a rapidly changing world.

Contains graphic accounts of heroism and brutality, and episodes of romantic and carnal intimacy.

Please leave a comment, good or bad, as feedback from readers is so important.

Chapter I

SPIDER - 2011

It is December in the year two thousand and eleven. A small Maasai settlement lay on the rim of the Ngorongoro Crater in northern Tanzania. The village is a collection of a dozen or so mud and thatched houses which have been constructed from whatever timber and scrub that could be collected from the savannah. Surrounding the village is an 'enjang', a barrier made of thorned acacia branches which protects the villagers and their cattle from the predatory animals that hunt out on the grassland.

These are Maasai, traditional cattle herders whose distant ancestors had migrated from the Nile valley to the North East. They consider that all the cattle in the world are their property, as decreed by their creator, and what we might think of as cattle rustling is, to them, simply returning the cattle to their rightful owners.

There have been repeated droughts over recent years and it seems to the Maasai people that the climate is becoming hotter, and certainly dryer, than they remember in the past. Looking out from the Maasai village, the shimmering African Savannah grassland reaches out to the distant Kilimanjaro Mountain, a dormant volcano which, at almost twenty thousand feet high and fifty miles across, dominates the horizon.

Just outside the enjang, in the shade of a large acacia tree, is a group of very happy young Maasai men adorned in their traditional woven red cloth. They are standing in a semi circle and are engaged in a jumping dance known as the 'adumu,' which is being watched by a group of excited young Maasai girls and younger boys. The dancers are all of similar appearance, tall and slender and at ease in their surroundings and, as they each take their turn in the circle, leaping as high as they can as the others sing to the rhythm of the dance, the young women are applauding, laughing and teasing the dancers.

One of the girls is standing near the trunk of the acacia tree, and a small boy, too young to join in the dance, notices that a huge

baboon spider which appears to be as large as his hand, is on the ground next to her feet. It has been disturbed from its burrow by the young men's pounding feet and is confused. The boy shouts a warning to the girl who glances to where he is pointing and, at the sight of the spider, she is immediately terrified. She utters a small scream as she backs away but the spider follows her in an effort to keep within the shelter of her shadow. All thoughts of continuing the dance is abandoned as the young people realize what has caused the commotion and, with the exception of the boy who gave the warning, they become disabled with laughter. He feels partially responsible for the situation, and rushes forward to grab the spider across its back between his thumb and forefinger then, having firmly secured the wriggling creature, he brandishes it high above his head in triumph before returning it back into the shade of the tree and releasing it on the ground. The arachnid remains motionless for a moment, as if to recompose its dignity, then casually saunters back to its tunnel and disappears.

The young man is Sironka who is eleven years old, soon to be twelve as he was born on the first morning of the new millennium. Although only a youngster, he is maturing rapidly and an increasingly handsome young man with an open face and generous smile. The laughter had subsided, and with the entertainment concluded, the crowd of youngsters quickly loose interest and resume their dance. The girl, however, just stood and gazed at Sironka, then she grabs him by the shoulders and kisses him on the cheek.

The gesture did not passed unnoticed, and her unexpected behaviour causes the young men to jeer and make silly noises as she turns and quickly walks away; however, before she disappears into the village, she looks back over her shoulder and gives Sironka an appraising smile. She is called Lilo, three years senior than Sironka and a desired beauty. Having spurned all the advances made by several of the young men in the village, she has consequently earned a reputation as being stuck-up and for thinking too much of herself. However, her high opinion of herself has been somewhat justified as she is about to be given in marriage to the senior elder of the village.

Chapter II

UNWELCOME GUESTS

The general noise and commotion of the young Maasai halted and Liloé was forgotten when, in the distance, one of the young men noticed an approaching vehicle on the dusty road. They knew it would not be bringing any tourists, as the villagers were always alerted to their visits by the local guides to give them time to don traditional dress and lay out any items that might be of interest as souvenirs.

As the vehicle drew nearer, with its trailing telltale plume of dust, it could be recognized as a large black sedan, a government vehicle which, from past experience, inevitably meant trouble for the village. The watchers, that now included many of the older residents, became uneasy and apprehensive.

Those who could, covered their faces with the tail ends of their clothing in an effort to avoid breathing in the fine dust cloud as the vehicle recklessly drove past and came to rest at the entrance of the hut belonging to the Headman, Olamayiani. Olamayiani's first wife, Lankenuna, was standing outside as the sedan arrived. She was a proud woman who, although well into her middle age, still retained striking good looks.

Lankenuna's grandfather had been a young Italian army officer who was engaged in fighting the British during 1941. At that time her grandmother was living in Eritrea and, although she was only fifteen years old, she was extraordinarily beautiful. The officer paid her parents well to allow him to make regular visits to her while his regiment was camped nearby and she became pregnant. As the girl swelled with the unborn child, the officer's visits became less frequent until they ceased altogether, and he was not heard from again. Rather than accept that she had been deserted, the girl chose to believe that the father of her baby had been killed by the British as they drove the Italians from their colonial settlements in East Africa, which was quite possible, although less likely.

The issue was a girl child and, when she had reached fourteen years of age, she was married into the Kenyan Maasai. In turn, her first child was Lankenuna who grew to be as beautiful as her grandmother, and tall and slender after her Maasai father. Lankenuna was thirteen when she met Olamayiani, the boy that was to become her husband and the chief of his clan.

Even at seventeen years of age Olamayiani had been powerfully built. Standing at over six feet in height, he had a strong, resolute face with deep-set eyes and a large, broad nose. He arrived at her village on a task set by his elders from across the border in Tanzania; he had been entrusted to buy and drive home some cattle.

Olamayiani's parents had already made arrangements for him to be married to a girl from his own village but, when he saw Lankenuna, all thoughts of complying with his parents' wishes were abandoned and he became determined that she would be his first wife. He paid Lankenuna's father seven of the newly purchased cows in advance for his daughter but, by returning with an unapproved wife, he had not only defied his father but also the whole clan as he had effectively stolen seven cows.

Olamayiani had ignored the traditional practices of his people and, by doing so, he had earned their disapproval. But he was, and remained throughout his life, particularly strong in the head as well as in the body and he would not be turned from keeping his unusually beautiful new acquisition as his first wife.

Lankenuna recognised the newly arrived passengers in the sedan as a couple of government henchmen, and she quickly ducked into the hut to warn her Husband.

Two middle aged, native Sub-Saharan Africans alighted from the vehicle, both dressed in open white shirts and city suits. The first to emerge was in his forties, he was seriously overweight and had no visible neck to support his large and round bald head. The second passenger was lightly built with a long neck and of a slightly Middle Eastern appearance. He sported a pair of cool, wrap-around sunglasses. The third and last occupant to climb out of the vehicle was the driver who was younger than the other two men and,

although not particularly tall, he was built like a heavyweight boxer. He also wore a pair of fashionable sunglasses.

As the two passengers pushed their way past a small group of onlookers, the driver waited and slouched against the hot metal side of the Sedan. He removed his sunglasses to reveal a long face and a heavy brow, and he proceeded to leer at the younger female watchers until they became too uncomfortable to remain in his presence and they returned to their daily business.

Inside the hut, Olamayiani was sitting with two other elders, Mrjooli and Tonkei. They were also his younger brothers. As the unwelcome guests arrived, Olamayiani directed Lankenuna outside, and the two visitors were left standing awkwardly, as they had not been invited to sit.

The fat man was called Lumbwi, and his partner was Chiumbo. Lumbwi smiled at Olamayiani and spoke first in the language of the Maasai, without being acknowledged by the three brothers.

‘Olamayiani, my old friend, I see Lankenuna still looks out for you,’ he said.

Olamayiani glared at the intruder.

‘You are not my friend,’ replied Olamayiani, ‘and my wife is no business of yours.’

Olamayiani regarded Lumbwi with unconcealed frustration; they had met many times before and Olamayiani had been consistently hostile and uncooperative, and it was only the protection afforded to the visitors by being government men that prevented Olamayiani and his brothers from killing them and putting their bodies out for the hyenas.

Lumbwi extended his arms with outwardly turned palms and whined with abject hypocrisy, ‘Why so hostile, I am only trying to help you and your people?’

Olamayiani looked away in disgust as Lumbwi continued, ‘You must understand, Olamayiani, that I cannot protect you indefinitely. The government will have their way in the end; you and your people no longer have a place here.’

Olamayiani had heard this claim and had rejected it so many times before but, once again, he replied defiantly, ‘We are the

Maasai Mara and this is our land, not the Governments. We have always been here and we will always be here. You are wasting your time, go away and leave us in peace.’

‘Well, that’s not exactly true, is it,’ said Lumbwi as he pulled his sagging waistband up over his belly before pontificating, ‘According to the historians, in times past, other peoples have called this place home and the Maasai came and pushed out the Akie people not so long ago. Now it is time for the Maasai to move on in the name of progress but, this time, you’re being offered a safe, new settlement with schools, hospitals, and plenty of simple work; cleaning jobs for the women; honest work to feed your families.’ Lumbwi laughed before adding, ‘Any widows or barren women can always earn extra money by providing personal services, you know, entertainment for the tourists.’

Lumbwi knew that he was being provocative by suggesting that Maasai women could resort to prostitution, but he was tired of having to deal with Olamayiani’s stubbornness and was indulging himself by knowingly offending the elders. Indeed, the three brothers were outraged by his suggestion and, together, they stood and glowered angrily at Lumbwi who, in a moment of fear, stepped back. Chumbo moved forward alongside him and, just for a moment, opened his jacket a little to reveal a gun tucked under his waistband. Olamayiani and the two brothers remained motionless whilst Lumbwi recomposed himself and angrily waved his pointed finger at the three Maasai.

‘Olamayiani, you think you can continue but you are wrong, and you will wish that you had been reasonable’.

The two men emerged backwards from the hut and, as they turned and walked the short distance to the sedan. A small mongrel dog capered up to them in the hope of being given a morsel or two, as so often happened when visitors came to the village. These; however, were not tourists, and Chumbo completely took the little dog by surprise when he savagely kicked it away from their path.

The government men left the village, accompanied by the roar of the large German sedan and the whine of the injured dog as the wheels kicked up another plume of dust through the enclosed village.

Chapter III

MABEL MARS

A middle-aged teacher from England had been watching the commotion, caused by the unwanted visitors, from the window of her small tin roofed schoolhouse. Her name was Miss Mabel Mars and, at that time, she was in her late thirties. She had lived there for many years and had long since become a permanent member of the community which she had no intention of ever leaving. Her home was built alongside the school and in the same fashion.

On Sundays, with a little reorganisation of the seating, the school became a church and surprisingly large numbers of villagers attended the morning service. On these occasions they wore their best robes and elaborate beaded jewellery and Mabel realised that it was mostly an opportunity to display their finest clothing and adornments that brought them to the services. Of course everyone, including Mabel, enjoyed some hearty singing, even though few of the congregation had any notion of or cared very much what it all meant.

Mabel still had an old Land Rover that she no longer used for getting about parked behind the school. At one time it had been adapted as a backup to her small wind generator that perched on the peak of the school roof but, following the instalment of solar panels, the Land Rover was now largely a forgotten relic. Mabel; however, insisted that it was kept in good order along with her short wave radio, another relic from the days before she had her mobile phone and the solitary school computer. The radio was seldom used but, every Saturday night, she would be sitting in one corner of her living room, exchanging a few words with a few diehard short wave radio hams around the world.

Her father had migrated to Britain from Jamaica with his parents in the nineteen-sixties. They were die-hard Anglican Christians, and Mabel shared her family's convictions with enthusiasm. She also felt the desire to follow her ancestral roots and

educate her African relatives in the hope of advancing them into a civilized way of life.

When still in her twenties, she was one of the first women to be ordained into the Church of England. And, soon after her ordination, she gained a position as a missionary teacher in East Africa where she had dedicated herself to the welfare of the village people. That had been almost twenty years ago, and she had long ago given up any hope of persuading the adults to abandon, what seemed to her, a primitive existence.

Soon after she arrived and Olamayiani had become aware that she was unmarried, he had made a nuisance of himself. At first he simply wanted sex, as he found her both attractive and intriguing. But after his advances failed and, being unused to rejection from the village womenfolk, he had become obsessed and, in an attempt to overcome his frustration, he had tried to make her his third wife. For well over a decade he had persisted in the pursuit of her before admitting defeat, and their relationship had become one of distant, mutual respect.

Over the years, Mabel had become increasingly concerned about the future of her flock and the Maasai Mara. When she first arrived she had hoped that they could be persuaded to abandon their traditional lifestyle in exchange for decent homes, schools and hospitals. But she eventually grew to understand, only too well, the deprivation that faced many of the Maasai people who had abandoned their independence and chosen to settle in the urban slums. The authorities were hopelessly corrupt and only sought to clear the tribes-people from large areas of savannah in order to exploit its natural resources and lease the Maasai hunting grounds to hunting syndicates.

These syndicates provided sport for oil rich clients from the Middle East who, having long ago destroyed much of the large fauna in their homelands, were seeking blood sports elsewhere. On the odd occasion when Mabel had attempted to reason with local officials about the exploitation of the animals in the African savannah, they had completely silenced and embarrassed her by pointing out that, unlike Britain, Africa still had forests and wildlife.

Unlike Britain, the Tanzanian wildlife had been preserved in huge nature reserves for posterity. Further more, unlike the UK, the leading members of Tanzanian society did not dress up in garish clothing and gallop over farmland with packs of crazed dogs in pursuit of a small red fox.

Having been humiliated on several occasions by this argument, and having had her comments brushed aside in this way, Mabel concentrated her efforts on educating the children as well as she was able in order to equip them for their future struggles with the outside world.

After the three government men had left, Mabel returned to her chair behind her desk.

Her class was made up mostly of children under thirteen, who were busy at their desks writing when Sironka burst into the room. Out of breath and covered in white salt marks, he stood for a moment while his class mates struggled to hide their giggles and smirks, knowing that he was about to get into trouble. Mabel looked up and beckoned him forward. He slowly approached and was silently directed to the wall, to stand alone as Mabel addressed the class.

All Mabel's lessons were conducted in English, as she considered that her student's best source of support in the future, financially and politically, would be forthcoming from the English speaking world.

'You can put away your books now children. Quietly please,' but the children were habitually very noisy.

'Quietly I said, thank you,' Mabel repeated.

The children eventually settled down and, when they were quite still, she continued.

'Thank you class you may leave, quietly now. Not you Sironka,' she added, as Sironka attempted an escape. 'I would like you to stay behind.'

As the children streamed out from the school, laughing and shrieking into the open air, Mabel collected her possessions. She gestured for Sironka to stand in front of her, and he looked worried as she stared at him over her glasses.

‘I don’t have to ask where *you* have been, covered in salt. You have been to Lake Magadi, haven’t you Sironka?’

‘I am sorry Miss.’

‘To see the flamingos, again?’

‘Yes Miss, sorry!’

Mabel sighed, unsure what to do. Sironka was often absent, and yet he was her star pupil. He seemed to make very little effort but rarely made a mistake in his work. The only class member that she could remember, recently, that even came close to his performance was Lilo, and she had been a most attentive student.

‘This is becoming a bit of a habit with you, Sironka. Tell me the truth; are my lessons so *very* boring for you?’

He didn’t want to upset his teacher and said nothing but, in an attempt to give some sort of reply, he gave an apologetic shrug.

For some time, Mabel had entertained the idea of Sironka attending a school in England, and she found herself saying, ‘Sironka, how would you like to go to an English school?’

Sironka was alarmed; he thought he was being expelled.

‘A different one Miss?’ he said in dismay.

‘Yes, but you would have to leave home and live in England.’

Sironka did not really understand, but he brightened a little at the prospect of living in England, until he remembered his father’s opinion of Westerners.

‘I don’t know, Miss, I think my father would not be happy.’

‘Well, we will just have to ask your father, won’t we? I can’t make any promises, but I have some very good friends in England who I know would very much like to help someone like you, Sironka.’

He simply shrugged, as the prospect was beyond his understanding.

After tidying away her desk, Mabel led Sironka the short distance to Olamayiani’s empty hut, as Sironka was the Head Man’s son. They eventually found Olamayiani at home with Lankenuna, Sironka’s Mother, and Mabel sat with Sironka’s parents and spoke in Maa, the language of the Maasai, explaining her proposition.

Olamayiani wasn't keen on the idea but Mabel persisted with her argument.

'You must realize that Sironka is exceptionally intelligent,' she explained. 'If I can arrange for him to be cared for by good people, I am asking you to allow him to live in England and attend a school where he can reach his potential.'

Olamayiani was still not impressed.

'That would be a foolish waste of time,' he said. 'Sironka is happy here and he has no need to leave his family.'

Lankenuna leant towards her husband and whispered in his ear, but he shrugged her away, it was obvious that she didn't agree with him. Mabel was disappointed and she could see that there was no point in pursuing the matter, for the time being, and she also recognised a potential ally in Sironka's mother.

Mabel spoke again to Olamayiani.

'Thank you for listening to my proposal. I will do my very best to teach your son all that I can, but I fear he will soon need a tutor far more knowledgeable than me.'

As Mabel stood, she remembered to add, 'One more thing, he keeps visiting the lake alone when he should be at his studies. He seems to be fascinated by the place but it is so very dangerous, please speak to him.'

'Soon he will no longer be your responsibility,' Olamayiani replied. 'Soon he will join the older boys and learn to be a warrior and to hunt, and there will be no time left for reading books in the company of women,' he added with finality.

Temporally defeated, Mabel began to take her leave but, as she did so, a conspiratorial look passed between her and Lankenuna.

Chapter IV

MANHOOD

A few days after Mabel's visit, Olamayiani decided that it was time that Sironka began to learn some hunting skills. Although Mrjooli and Tonkei occasionally hunted, Olamayiani no longer bothered; however, all three brothers took Sironka along with some men from the village to hunt gazelle on the Savannah.

Although the three brothers were all traditionally attired with red woollen robes, armed with shields crafted from buffalo hide and carried a hunting spear or a bow, they were distinctly different in appearance as they were all born to different mothers. Mrjooli was the tallest and very slim, apart from a developing pot-belly. Tonkei was the younger of the three, also slim but shorter. Olamayiani was the oldest, and at fifty years of age he still retained an impressive physique. His skin was near jet black in colour and covered in scars from encounters with animals during hunting expeditions, and unwise and unlucky human foes. Sironka had also been armed with a shield and a spear, both slightly smaller to match his stature.

Although the grass was parched and yellowed, it stood high enough to provide cover for the Maasai. Olamayiani, Mrjooli and Tonkei were waiting, crouched in the grass while the remaining men circled ahead to get closer to a small group of gazelle. Sironka was relegated to a position behind and was told to keep out of sight.

Without warning, two gazelle suddenly appeared, fleeing the advancing hunters. When unexpectedly faced with the three brothers, they paused for a brief instant before bounding past, but there was enough time for one arrow to find its mark and a mortally wounded gazelle lay kicking in the long grass.

Sironka jumped up and excitedly ran ahead to see the kill but a young male lion, disturbed from its own hunting of the gazelle, leaped out of cover; Sironka had put himself between the lion and its intended direction of escape. Stepping back from the charging lion, Sironka stumbled and fell, clinging to his spear for support which inadvertently caught the inexperienced lion in the chest. The

unfortunate beast crashed down onto Sironka as the spear passed right through its body and Sironka found himself pinned to the ground in stifling darkness.

The hot sticky fur was suffocating, and the stink of the lion overwhelmed Sironka's senses. As he fought desperately to control the panic that was building inside his head, he could hear muffled voices of alarm as the Maasai ran to help him. The sounds of his kinsmen faded away as he began to lose consciousness and the boom of the lion's heart passed through him and became indistinguishable from his own. He was no longer afraid.

Hypnotised by the slowing heartbeat, he felt an enormous loss and sadness as the last of the lion's lifeblood flowed over him. He *was* the young lion, peacefully standing free on the Maasai Mara. He felt the soft wind vibrate through his whiskers as he surveyed the open savannah before him and he knew joy.

He looked up, and the blinding sun shone painfully into his eyes and the wind was no longer gentle, it began to hurt his face.

'Wake up boy, WAKE UP!'

Sironka opened his eyes and could see that someone was stooped over him and, as he focused onto his father's face, he saw fear. But it was quickly replaced with an expression of anger that struck Sironka as being amusing, and he laughed.

'YOU, STUPID, BOY!' his father shouted. 'Next time you feel like killing yourself, tell me, and I will save you the trouble. And why are you laughing? Idiot child!'

The lion's dead body had been pulled away to reveal an unconscious Sironka and, convinced that his son was dead, Olamayiani had slapped his face in near panic until the boy had recovered consciousness. Sironka's face and upper body was covered in blood, and the men chattered with concern as they wiped it away and checked to see if he was injured. Unhurt, but dazed and shaky, they raised him to his feet and, as he looked around, a huge smile developed across his face and the hunting party burst into laughter and relief at his escape.

Although the people had abandoned the hunting of lions and were now dedicated to protecting those remaining on their lands,

Sironka had been truly blessed and at no fault of his own. The men were in great jubilation; he had escaped injury and, although he could hardly stand, they raised him to their shoulders and chanted “Miterienanka, Miterienanka.” This was a very special name which meant, 'One who is quick to claim glory by killing a lion'.

On their return to the village, with not only a gazelle but also with Miterienanka's lion skin, there was great celebration and it was undisputed that Miterienanka had earned his lion name. All that remained for him to be acknowledged as having passed into manhood would be the rituals leading to, and including, his circumcision ceremony. This; however, would have to wait until he had grown and his body had caught up with his courageous heart. Nevertheless, from then on he would be known by his people as Miterienanka.

Liloe waited for the crowd to finish congratulating him, and when he was almost alone again with his proud father, she caught his eye and they exchanged meaningful smiles. Even though he was only eleven years old, she had decided that Miterienanka would be her first special friend and once they had both undergone the traditional ceremonies of adulthood, they could have a physical relationship, even if her father chose a different husband. She knew this was likely as she was desired by older and more important warriors but, in spite of his youth, Miterienanka was her hero and she was a determined young lady.

She wondered if she could impress his father and, maybe, Olamayiani would choose her to be Miterienanka's first wife. She was not to know that Olamayiani had been impressed by her beauty and wanted her for himself. A settlement had already been reached and the marriage would take place within the year, soon after her fifteenth birthday.

A few days after the killing of the lion, Olamayiani and his two brothers, the elders Mrjooli and Tonkei, were sitting out of the heat of the day in Lankenuna's hut while she served them refreshments; a fermented milk drink.

‘What a palaver,’ said the worried Olamayiani. ‘The trouble with these government men can only worsen.’

‘I too can only see darker days ahead for the Maasai,’ Mrjooli agreed.

‘Our father would have been saddened by recent events, are we to be diminished and scattered, driven from our homeland,’ Tonkei lamented?

‘I have been thinking about the English woman,’ Olamayiani began.

‘So, what’s new,’ Mrjooli interrupted? ‘You are always thinking about the English woman.’

‘No, not in that way, I have finished with those ideas about her and I have found a new interest, but that is all I am saying right now...’

‘If you are talking about Liloe, we already know,’ Mrjooli once more interjected.

‘Does everyone know,’ Olamayiani asked in surprise?

‘What do you think,’ Mrjooli replied?

Olamayiani was annoyed at discovering that his plans for a third wife were common knowledge. But, then again, his brother was right, what did he expect?

He began to explain what was on his mind.

‘The English woman wants to send my last and only son to England, to be *educated*.’ Olamayiani distorted his face with distaste as he uttered the word, educated.

Mrjooli picked up on Olamayiani’s disapproval of the word and contributed.

‘What do city dwellers know of education? They have many toys but they cannot make anything for themselves. When they visit us, they are unable to perform the simplest task.’

‘Yes,’ said Tonkei, ‘Their men cannot pull a bow and, I was told, their womenfolk can’t even repair the clothes they wear with such pride, let alone make them. What good are these for a wife?’

‘Some might be able to tie two pieces of thread together but let them first make the thread,’ jeered Mrjooli.

They all nodded in sage agreement before sharing a moment of mirth at the expense of city-dwellers. But Olamayiani quickly

became serious again and raised his hand for their attention, and the laughing subsided.

‘He would also need to be adopted by the English people; for the paperwork. For them, it seems that the world is made up of either paper or shit.’

They sat in silence, each contemplating the sorrowful prospects for any man trapped by civilisation. The daily, bone grinding toil for a boss that was unworthy of any respect; a life sentence with the same woman in one of the dirty slums that clung like a malignant growth upon every town and city, and the inevitable alcoholism and subsequent death that often resulted from drinking alcohol in an attempt to escape their imprisonment.

Olamayiani was the first to shake off these fearful visions of the future for the Maasai.

‘I have to decide, my brothers, what is to be done with Miterienanka?’

‘He will make a great warrior,’ said Tonkei. ‘That would be lost if he left now.’

‘Yes, we need warriors to keep our lands from our enemies,’ agreed Mrjooli.

‘It is not our usual enemies that worries me, it is the government men,’ said Olamayiani.

Mrjooli and Tonkei both nodded their agreement as Olamayiani continued, ‘One warrior more or less will make little difference, just one more to die in a one-sided struggle. I am minded to let him go. Maybe he will be able to help in another way.’

‘How is he to help if he becomes one of them,’ asked Tonkei? ‘They are only powerful with guns and machines. I see nothing good coming from losing a promising young warrior.’

Olamayiani was silent for a few moments as he searched for a way to describe his feelings upon the matter.

‘I cannot answer you, but there is something in the boy’s eyes...’

Tonkei interrupted, ‘Yes, dirt!’ He immediately regretted his outburst, his elder Brother was being serious. Olamayiani turned to look straight at Tonkei for a moment before continuing, ‘As I was

saying, when I look into his face I see our father. It is as if there is a message that I cannot understand.’

Olamayiani became matter of fact again, ‘I will have to let him go but, before he is lost to us, we must do all we can to train him as Maasai, he must not forget who his true people are.’

‘As you wish Olamayiani,’ said Mrjooli.

‘When do we start,’ asked Tonkei?

‘Let his training begin tomorrow! I am sure it will be a while before the English woman can arrange things; we have some time left to us to make the man from the boy.’

At the very first light the following morning, Mrjooli, Tonkei and Miterienanka left the village and walked into the open grassland. They were all bearing a traditional spear and shield, and Miterienanka was to be instructed in their use. Mrjooli and Tonkei looked magnificent in their red clothing and beaded hair, but Tonkei was in a grumpy mood and, as they walked, he made no effort to conceal his bad temper.

‘I hate Mondays,’ he complained, knowing full well that it was not a Monday.

‘That’s OK then, it’s Friday,’ snapped Mrjooli, incorrectly.

‘Is it,’ Tonkei asked in mock surprise?

‘Yes,’ Mrjooli confirmed with a smile!

‘O...well I must hate Fridays as well then.’

The two men chuckled and, having used some of his anger to ridicule the alien and imprisoning concept of weekdays, Tonkei felt lighter in spirit and they continued walking in silence.

When they had covered a mile or two, they judged that it was far enough and early enough to avoid any unwanted idle watchers.

Tonkei squared up to Miterienanka.

‘Ready, boy?’

‘Yes Uncle,’ Miterienanka replied and the training began.

They were pushing the boy’s abilities and, although the two men were considered elderly among the Maasai, Tonkei was fast and precise as he launched a succession of attacks upon Miterienanka who successfully deflected them away with his shield, but he repeatedly left his body unguarded and vulnerable. Tonkei

became increasingly frustrated at this simple mistake and, when it was repeated once too often, he drove his shield against the boy's undefended side and knocked him flat on his behind.

With his spear levelled at Miterienanka's throat, Tonkei shouted, 'You are *dead* boy!' as he stood over him.

Miterienanka was dismayed and embarrassed.

'But I did not know that you would attack me like that!' Miterienanka complained.

'Fool that you are boy! Do you think your enemy will warn you first,' said Tonkei as he withdrew his spear. 'Try again boy. This time keep your shield closer to your body and do not wave it about. Deflect your enemy's spear with small movements and be ready to let your spear arm dart out before the attacker can recover from a foolish lunge.'

Miterienanka got up from the dusty ground and adopted a defensive stance once again. This time, when Tonkei lunged at him, he had more success.

Mrjooli, who was watching, commented, 'That's better boy. Maybe next time, when an enemy attacks you, he will not have to throw himself onto your spear.'

The two uncles laughed, and Miterienanka looked a little hurt for a moment, but he quickly smiled at his foolishness.

After an hour of punishing training, a group of teenage village boys appeared and, keeping at a safe distance and between giggles, they began to call out to the trio in an attempt to find some amusement.

'Ignore them,' said Mrjooli, and the training continued.

With no reaction, the boy's cat calls became increasingly provocative, until the leader of the gang called out.

'Hey, what are two old men doing out here with a little boy,' and the group sniggered?

This was too much for Tonkei to tolerate, he was still feeling irritable.

'Clear off you little bastards, and grow some balls before you get cheeky with me.'

The boy replied.

‘Your wives and daughters have never complained about them.’

Tonkei was bitten badly by the jeer and turning, he levelled his spear over his shoulder in the direction of the boys who scattered to a safer distance, but they could hardly run for laughing.

Mrjooli placed his hand over Tonkei’s spear arm and spoke softly to him.

‘Easy Tonk. They remind me of when we were out here as boys, eh?’

Tonkei, who was still staring at the retreating boys, relaxed a little and allowed his arm to fall back to his side.

‘Cheeky little brats but, yes, you are right, we were not always well behaved,’ and he smiled at the memory and the incident brought Miterienanka’s first lesson to a close, but it was the beginning of a punishing training regime.

Chapter V

THE MASTERS - 2012

After Mabel's visit, Lankenuna had been constantly working on Olamayiani in an effort to persuade him to allow Miterienanka to be educated in England. It wasn't that Lankenuna thought the traditional village life with the Maasai was a bad environment for her son, it was simply that she was very aware of the threat to their way of life from the outside world. She was concerned that if their traditional life came to end, without a good education, Miterienanka might be forced into poverty in one of the slum dwellings around a town or city. He may even become a drunkard and prematurely die in a gutter as had happened to so many Maasai men. Some of the women who had deserted their traditional life had fared no better, having turned to prostitution, leading to disease and an early death.

To her surprise, the next time she broached the subject of Miterienanka's education with Olamayiani, he agreed without argument simply stating, "Do whatsoever you think best, woman, what is it to me that you wish to send my only Son away."

Lankenuna sometimes knew the old devil better than he knew himself; he would never agree to anything if it was against his wishes, and she suspected that he was simply attempting to pass the responsibility of any unwanted consequences on to her shoulders. 'Well, if that is all there is to it,' she thought, 'so be it. It is worth it for the sake of Miterienanka's future.'

The following day Lankenuna accompanied her son to school, primarily to ensure that he attended but also to speak to Miss. Mars and confirm to her that Olamayiani was prepared to allow Miterienanka to be educated in England. There were; however, certain conditions. The main condition was that the prospective adoptive parents must visit Miterienanka's village, and be interviewed by his parents to assess their suitability to care for the child. These conditions were in fact a lie, an invention by Lankenuna to maintain some control over the process, and satisfy herself that her son would be in safe hands. Her husband would be

none the wiser about her interference and it might pre-empt any unreasonable demands he may decide to impose at a later date, should it suit his purpose, and she was having none of that.

The couple that Mabel contacted were Ralph and Gloria Masters, who Mabel knew to be childless, though not through choice, but rather due to fertility problems. Mabel knew that Ralph had never been too keen on adoption, and that he had previously managed to persuade his wife, Gloria, that it was worth continuing their efforts for her to conceive. But Mabel was hoping that, as none of them were getting any younger, Ralph may have grown to be more receptive to the idea of adoption.

Gloria and Mabel had been at college together and had kept in touch during the intervening years. When they were still in their twenties, Mabel had attended Gloria's wedding at a small village in Oxfordshire, and it was at the wedding that Mabel had met Ralph Masters for the first time. He was quite a bit older than Gloria, and was an engineer and environmental biologist. He had been involved in the design and construction of major civil engineering projects for many years necessitating him to live overseas for months at a time but, now that he was settling down, he had secured a permanent advisory position for the British government in the department of the environment.

The reception was at a large manorial hotel and, in addition to the newlyweds, all the guests were provided with accommodation during the wedding night.

After the reception, Mabel was unable to sleep, having consumed far too much food, and she had laid awake sweating and counting the minutes for what seemed like hours. Eventually, not able to bear her sleeplessness any longer, she rose, dressed, and made her way down the stairs to the lounge where, to her surprise, Ralph was sitting and reading a newspaper. His new bride had consumed far too much alcohol, copiously vomiting over him before finally falling asleep and, not wishing to disturb her and to escape the stench of his wife's vomit, Ralph had showered and dressed to spend the night slumped in a lounge chair with a small bottle of brandy.

Delighted at the prospect of company, Ralph invited Mabel to sit and share what remained of his brandy. Neither had over indulged in alcohol at the reception and, after chatting for a while and getting along really rather well, Mabel took pity on Ralph and offered him the use of the spare bed in her twin room. However, much to her shame, they actually shared the same bed, and his disappointment at facing a loveless wedding night, and her solitary aloneness, found comfort together.

'Thank goodness,' thought Mabel, 'that Gloria knew nothing of this incident, and she was never going to admit to having stolen Gloria's wedding night'. But the incident had utterly changed her life.

Although Mabel was already considering missionary work, it was soon after the wedding that she had secured her position as the church school teacher in the Maasai village. This had all been many years in the past, and she had no desire to return to England but, for the sake of Miterienanka's future, she was prepared to face up to the embarrassment of meeting Ralph Masters and, more worrying, her old friend, Gloria, once again.

On hearing the news from Mabel about a gifted boy who was seeking adoption in the UK, Gloria had immediately asked for more information, including some pictures. To Gloria's surprise, Ralph didn't seem to object to the idea and, more surprisingly, he seemed to be positively enthusiastic. Within a few short weeks, he had researched and set in motion the initial adoption and immigration procedures with the agencies involved in both the UK and in Tanzania, and now it only remained for them to visit the village, meet the boy and his parents, and see how things developed.

Shortly before the Masters were expected to arrive, Miterienanka and his father were standing together, side by side, just outside the village barrier on a small rise. They were gazing into the African sun as it was falling below the horizon, and Olamayiani spoke to his son.

'You have done well in your training and soon the English people will come to take you away. Is this what you want to do Miterienanka?'

‘No father,’ Miterienanka honestly replied, ‘but I have heard you and my uncles talking. If I am truly clever, this may be a way to help our people.’

‘I am very proud of you my son.’

‘I am only what you have made me, father,’ Miterienanka flatly stated. ‘and I will try not to disappoint you, and I promise to return.’

Olamayiani turned to face Miterienanka, placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder and, looking into the boy's eyes, said, ‘Miterienanka, here we have freedom and can live as Engai intended.’ Engai is the Maasai supreme sky god.

‘The white people have lost their freedom and have become as slaves, like beasts of burden. In many ways they are no better than our cattle or goats; they cannot provide for themselves and need their cities in order to survive.’

Olamayiani paused, considering his words before continuing.

‘I have agreed to you going to England, but you must remember all that you have been taught. Remember that your home is here and that you can return at any time you wish.’

Miterienanka listened to his father without even thinking of interrupting or asking questions. It was the first time that his father had spoken to him in this way, and he was revelling in his father treating him like an adult. In fact, it was the first time that he could remember his father talking to him at all, apart from simple instructions such as, “Go away and bother your mother.”

As the day drew to an end, Olamayiani gazed at the failing strip of crimson across the horizon and continued, as if speaking to himself.

‘Insanity appears to be common amongst civilized people. An insanity that is killing the world, and I don't understand them at all. They destroy the earth and they seem to be without honour and only care for themselves. They neither value nor defend their lands or their women, and they either toil at pointless tasks or steal from their neighbours table all for the sake of money. None dance to the music of Engai; they are all strange to me.’

He turned to face his son again, returning to the matter in hand.

‘Hopefully your new guardians are like the English woman, your teacher, and mean well. I think they must be good people, you must learn all you can from them.

‘The English woman tells your mother that the lands of Oxford are safer than the greater cities in England but, avoid trouble Miterienanka. I have been told that it is often the black people that get into trouble with the English laws, and there are many prisons where those who break these unnatural rules are imprisoned like animals at the market place.

‘Remember, you will be there to learn the ways of these creatures that live such unhealthy lives, but you are not one of them. Be guided by the common sense that Engai has chosen to bestow upon you with such generosity and remember that you are Maasai. And remember also that your people will be here to welcome you when you return.’

He smiled at his son and was full of affection for his youngest and only surviving son, who was looking so serious.

In the face of his father’s unusual behaviour, Miterienanka managed to dutifully reply.

‘I will do as you say father.’

Olamayiani gazed into his sons eyes for a moment as if looking for something, then grinned and ruffled his loose hair.

‘I can see that one day you will be a great leader of our people, Miterienanka.’

The Masters imminent visit was common knowledge amongst the villagers and, when the dust trail from their taxi was seen from well over a mile away as it travelled along the dirt track, a small crowd quickly gathered to greet them.

With much excitement, the Maasai welcomed the weary travellers as they climbed out of the vehicle in front of Mabel’s small tin-roofed home and, as they were greeted and guided inside by Mabel, their belongings were quickly retrieved from the trunk by the villagers and reverently carried shoulder high into the shade provided by Mabel’s veranda. Having witnessed all the drama that seemed likely to occur and, with much waving and chanting

“Goodbye”, the smiling villagers dispersed to return to their former tasks.

When the formality of their mutual greetings had been completed, the Masters were settled onto a cane sofa to be supplied with tea and biscuits, which were served using Mabel’s prized gilded china.

‘Well, isn’t this nice? I get so few visitors from home; well, you are in fact my first,’ Mabel said awkwardly, followed by a forced chuckle.

‘You’re looking well Mabel,’ Gloria dispassionately replied. Living here among these people obviously suits you, don’t you think so Ralph?’ she added, glancing briefly at her husband?

Ralph gave a nod and an uncomfortable smile, while Mabel attempted to decide if she should treat the comment as a compliment.

Choosing to change the subject, Mabel replied.

‘You both must be tired after your journey. You will be staying here, of course.’

Gloria looked momentarily piqued, and she attempted to speak, but Mabel continued in an effort to deflect a refusal.

‘I will, naturally, move into the school house. It will be no hardship, I virtually live in there anyway,’

‘We couldn’t possibly, Mabel,’ said Gloria with finality. ‘Ralph has already booked a room at a Lodge, just a few miles away, and we couldn’t put upon you more than necessary. You have done so much for us already, hasn’t she Ralph!’

Gloria was certain that there was an element of hostility underlying Gloria's behaviour, could she have discovered Mabel's betrayal all those years ago? She pressed on regardless.

‘Well, at least stay tonight,’ she said, ‘and at any other time you wish. When it is convenient of course, please treat this as your home, I would like that very much.’

Gloria chose not to respond to this suggestion, and she changed the subject.

‘Do tell all Mabel. How have you managed as a single woman amongst the Maasai? I hear that, unlike Europe, extra marital affairs

here are quite accepted which must make it so much easier for a woman without a husband.'

Mabel's fears were confirmed by such a direct reference to adultery. Gloria either knew or suspected her encounter with Ralph. He had either confessed to Gloria or she was testing Mabel to observe her reactions. Feeling betrayed, Mabel felt awful and her mind reeled in an attempt to escape from her predicament. The corners of Gloria's mouth began to curl slightly, almost in anticipation of Mabel's humiliation, but Ralph interjected.

'The boy, Mabel, when can we meet him?'

Grateful for Ralph's gallant intervention, Mabel replied.

'I am surprised that he isn't here already, he can't be far away, and I would have expected his curiosity to have long since got the better of him'

She looked out of the open door and saw Liloë, standing there.

'Liloë dear,' Mabel called. 'Please find Miterienanka for me would you?'

Liloë said nothing but, giving a small nod and what seemed like a small curtsy, she dashed off.

Ralph continued to question Mabel regarding the boy's interests and character, and generally engage the two women in harmless chatter until, some time later and without warning, Miterienanka came bursting into Mabel's home like a wild thing.

He was out of breath and covered in mud and white salt powder but, through his rudeness and filth, his broad white smile and radiating eyes illuminated the room and instantly captured Gloria's heart.

During the following month, the Masters and Miterienanka spent a lot of time together. They were either touring the district with Mabel's old Land Rover, or wandering around the village chatting, with Miterienanka enthusiastically and proudly explaining the villager's way of life. Everyone in the community was fully up to date with any gossip about the visitors and their plans for Miterienanka, and Liloë could often be seen, watching in sadness from a distance.

Liloe had been informed about her coming marriage to Olamayiani, but she was to be spared the circumcision rite. This was mostly due to Mabel's interference, with Lankenuna's support, as Olamayiani disapproved of any deviation to the traditions of the Maasai. But he had eventually conceded to the omission and, although Liloe was resigned to her fate as bride to Olamayiani, she had not lost all hope of becoming Miterienanka's lover.

The only remaining obstacle to be overcome, to allow Miterienanka to begin his new life in England, was for Olamayiani to approve and sign the necessary documents. Accordingly, all concerned met on the following Saturday seated at a specially erected trestle table, with Mabel and the masters to one side, and Olamayiani, his two brothers and Lankenuna sitting opposite. Apart from Mabel, no-one present could understand both English and Maa; she was going to have to translate for both parties.

No one spoke for a while and, as atmosphere grew increasingly uncomfortable, Olamayiani noisily cleared his throat and spoke to Mabel.

'Why do these people want to take my son to England? I hear that the young people there are no good. I hear it is a very bad place for young people.'

Ralph and Gloria both looked to Mabel for her translation as she composed herself. She felt the weight of responsibility over the whole affair, and she didn't want to let anyone down.

'Olamayiani doesn't understand why you wish to adopt his son and take him to live in England.'

Gloria replied.

'Please tell him that we've been unable to have a child of our own and, by having Miterienanka with us and by helping him with his education, well, it would fill an empty space in our home that has been waiting so long... that needs a child.'

Gloria became emotional and Ralph reached out and held her hand reassuringly.

Mabel spoke again in Maasai to Olamayiani.

‘Mrs. Masters says that she is very unhappy because she cannot bear children and, if you allowed her to care for Miterienanka, she would love him as a member of her family.’

When Mabel finished speaking, Olamayiani looked shocked.

‘Is she saying she will have sex with Miterienanka?’

Olamayiani visibly recoiled as Mabel shot a withering stare at him and forcibly corrected his misunderstanding, as if to a naughty child in her classroom.

‘Not at all Olamayiani,’ she scolded. ‘I realise that you’re keen to find objections to this arrangement, and I am thankful that the Masters cannot understand your accusation. They are a very respectable Christian couple. Mrs. Masters is trying to tell you that she will take care of your son as well as she would take care of her own son, if she had a son, of her own, which she hasn’t.’

Olamayiani nodded under Mabel’s rebuke, but she hadn’t finished. She did; however, continue in a more kindly tone.

‘Mrs. Masters is barren and needs to have a child in her home to care for and shower with kindness. She is not a happy wife.’

It was Olamayiani’s turn to retake the initiative.

‘Any fool can see that, but you ask her, what advantage will there be for Miterienanka in leaving his home to be the false son of a barren woman amongst a dangerous people.’

Mabel sighed; she was already beginning to feel drained from acting as a conduit between two incompatible worlds, desperately seeking common ground on which to build trust between the two parties.

She once more addressed the Masters.

‘Olamayiani asks how leaving his home would help Miterienanka find his way in life.’

In spite of the language barrier, it was obvious to the Masters that there had been a disagreement, and it had alarmed Gloria. It was Ralph that struck a note of universal understanding as he aimed his reply directly at Olamayiani.

‘Please tell Olamayiani that we have a large house, a great deal of money and influence in our society, and we will give Miterienanka every advantage in his education that money can buy.’

'Provided that he has the abilities, he will be able to rise to a position of power to the fullest extent that western civilization has to offer. And I give Olamayiani my word that I will use both my money and influence to protect him and help him fulfil any worthy ambition that he might have.'

Mabel could feel a serious headache creeping up on her from behind, and hoped that this ordeal would quickly come to an end before one of her migraines clubbed her between the eyes.

She took a moment to condense Ralph's statement before translating.

'Mr. Masters says that he has a large house, a great deal of money and power, and he will help Miterienanka to become a powerful man.'

This was the language that Olamayiani well understood, and it proved to be the deal-maker. Sentimentality had its place, but it had no part in deciding the future of his son.

'Very well,' he said. 'They can have him,' Olamayiani pronounced. 'But they must allow him to return at any time, if he so wishes. If they agree to that, it is settled.'

Mabel translated with relief.

'Olamayiani says that he agrees provided that, if Miterienanka is unhappy there, he must be allowed to return to his family.'

Gloria tumbled out her reply,

'O, yes, of course he must, we would not dream of-'

Ralph leant forward and touched his wife upon her arm.

'Mabel, please tell Olamayiani that it is agreed,' he said.

On hearing Mabel's translation, Olamayiani rose to his feet, with everyone following his. Then, turning to face Ralph, he spat at him across the improvised table and stood, motionless, as if waiting for a reply. Ralph, shocked, was taken aback, but Mabel quickly instructed him on what was happening.

'Sorry, Ralph, I should have warned you,' she said. 'Olamayiani is sealing the arrangement, rather like shaking hands. It is their way, I'm afraid. You will have to spit back at him.'

Ralph looked very uncomfortable as Olamayiani stood waiting.

'Mabel, are you sure,' he asked?

‘Quite sure, please do it!’ Mabel confirmed.

Ralph hesitated for a moment, and then he gave the tiniest smile and spat on his right hand before reaching out to Olamayiani, who was puzzled for a moment, but then gave a broad smile of understanding. Olamayiani knew well enough of the Western custom of shaking hands to close a deal but, this, he thought, must be either a variation on the custom, or Ralph has just made it up. Either way, Olamayiani was impressed, and he spat on his own right hand before respectfully taking a wet grip of Ralph’s and gave it a theatrical shake.

Olamayiani’s two brothers found this development highly amusing, and they could barely restrain themselves from laughing out loud.

Tonkei muttered, ‘He caught you out there Olamayiani!’

Followed by Mrjooli commenting, ‘Didn’t see that one coming did you!’

Olamayiani was not at all amused at his brother’s jibes and, as he recovered his hand, he looked at Ralph with some new found respect, as if seeing him properly for the first time and he thought, ‘This man has a quick mind and a sense of humour, unusual for a white man.’

Shortly after daybreak, a few days after Olamayiani had agreed to the adoption, he and Lankenuna stood together outside the village and watched as the taxi carrying their son grew smaller along the track from the village. Olamayiani spoke after it had finally disappeared, and his words were full of regret.

‘Wife, I feel that I have said goodbye to my only surviving son.’

‘I do not wish to think so husband,’ she replied. Her voice was full of hope for her child.

Chapter VI

CIVILISATION

The Masters returned to England with Miterienanka on a flight from Kilimanjaro airport to Heathrow, London. Miterienanka sat next to the window with Gloria beside him in the centre seat. She was unaware of Ralph, who occupied the gangway seat, her attention being completely devoted to her new charge.

Ralph wasn't entirely free from resentment for this addition to his family as he would obviously, to some extent, be displaced from her affections. He dearly loved Gloria but, apart from their last attempts at conception, Gloria appeared to consider the sexual element in their relationship to be largely a thing of the past. However, he took consolation in the knowledge that, with his wife's new distraction, there would be less scrutiny regarding any weekend conferences, overtime or late night meetings he may have with ambitious, promotion seeking junior female co-workers.

Miterienanka found the experience of the huge metal plane taking off overwhelming and, as he tried to maintain a manly confidence, Gloria smiled with understanding as they were pushed back into their seats by the acceleration accompanied by the whining roar of the engines. Gloria's reassuring hand holding his was barely noticed while he battled with his conflicting emotions of exhilaration and abject fear.

Having arrived at Heathrow Airport shortly before midnight, the Masters, along with their new charge, made their way to the immigration department and the unavoidable rigmarole involved when returning from overseas to the UK. They were tired, and Ralph, in particular, was ill prepared for the suspicious cross-questioning they had to endure from the Immigration Officer. After some time of being interrogated, they were transferred to another station to the rear of the flow of the incoming human traffic and the interrogation began all over again. This all became too much when the officer's questions directed at Gloria became more personal and distressing, and Ralph had squared up to the officer.

‘Excuse me officer,’ he began, ‘but am I correct in my belief that all of our documents are in order,’ he asked?

‘I’m afraid I can’t comment on that right now sir,’ the officer replied dismissively, and he returned his attention to Gloria.

‘As I was saying,’ he continued, ‘I find it difficult to understand the purpose of this boy’s presence in the UK.’

Ralph was nearing the end of his tether and he once more interrupted, but this time more forcefully.

‘Excuse me for interrupting again officer. I realise that as a white, middle class male, I am therefore a member of the silenced minority and my input is considered to be irrelevant, but...’

Gloria shuddered at the choice of words and tone of Ralph’s voice and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. She knew that his temper was passing beyond the point of no return; the ship containing Ralph’s good nature was inevitably heading for dead man’s reef and the immigration officer was about to be challenged to whatever level was necessary for Ralph to resolve the situation to his satisfaction.

At times like these, she felt so ashamed of him. She would have gladly worn a comical hat with, ‘I’m not with Him,’ written upon it.

The last embarrassment that he had caused her was at their local bank when, after a few minutes argument, during which the clerk had been attempting and justify various charges that had been made against their joint account, Ralph had loudly stated to the other customers who were obediently waiting in a lengthy queue, ‘There was a time when a desperate man off the street would be the bank-robber. Now it’s the other way around!’

She wondered why he insisted on bullying officials. He knew it would backfire on him, and she hurriedly ran her mind over their medical supplies, mentally checking whether they needed to buy some indigestion tablets on the way home.

‘I suggest that, if you can’t decide for yourself whether or not our documents are in order,’ Ralph continued, ‘that you find someone who can. Or, if it is the case that you suspect some sort of fraud or other wrong doing is at hand...’

‘Sir, if you wouldn’t mind...’ the officer attempted to assert his authority, but Ralph continued.

‘If that is the case, please feel free to call for assistance from the police, the Home Office, or whoever it is that you feel can be of assistance to you in your dilemma, because, Officer...’

‘Sir, if you don’t...’ but there was no stopping Ralph now.

‘You see, we have a life and we would very much like to continue with it, and you making a supreme effort to confound travellers with legitimate documentation who wish to enter the United Kingdom is not going to counter the effects of decades of criminal incompetence on the part of the Immigration Department, the Home Office, or previous governments.’

As Ralph remorselessly continued, the officer had given up on his attempt to stem Ralph’s flow of indignation, and he was finding it difficult to control his own temper.

Dealing with what Ralph considered to be Phelps in positions of minor authority, presented him with little difficulty and he continued with relish as he fully got into his stride. His complaint had become a lecture in how to run the immigration service and the officer had called for assistance. Gloria shuddered once again. She was half expecting to spend the night in detention as Ralph continued his tirade.

‘I don’t remember any complaint from the immigration service when they demanded, and received, large amounts of cash for rubber-stamping the boy’s visa, and I suggest that if you personally feel it is your indebted duty to ensure that unauthorised immigration into the United Kingdom is properly countered, you apply for a transfer and leave your comfortable seat in this climate controlled environment behind a toughened glass screen and take up your crusade within the United Kingdom Immigration Service’s enforcement arm. In the mean time I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to make up your mind whether or not I and my family are to be allowed into our country of residence, without any further delay.’

Two additional immigration personnel appeared and relieved the beleaguered officer as, apparently, it was his break-time. He

seemed reluctant to take it and had to be soothed by one of the officers, rather like a small drunk being held back from a fight with someone twice his size.

After the original officer had left the scene, their documents were promptly cleared and the officers had the good grace to apologise to Ralph for the delay but added, with a hint of mystery, that there were justifiable reasons for their fellow operative being thorough when dealing with the immigration of young people. Ralph knew exactly to what they were referring and, as a departing shot, he suggested that the criminals who ran enforced prostitution and enslavement shouldn't have been allowed into the country in the first place.

In the event, Gloria didn't have to spend the night in detention at Heathrow and they finally arrived at their home in a small village called Sandford-on-Thames near Oxford.

Miterienanka adjusted surprisingly quickly to life in the UK. That was largely due to Mabel's dedicated efforts in educating and preparing the boy for his new life, and Gloria felt a little cheated that he was less dependent on her guidance because of it. In spite of that, she kept Miterienanka at home for the first few weeks to give him ample time to settle down prior to, what she feared would be, the culture shock awaiting him at school. During this time he spent a great deal of time watching TV and was beginning to realise that, although his homeland in the Savannah was a vast geographical expanse, it amounted to very little in the world of international affairs. He began to see just how frail his former life and culture was in the face of powerful foreign interests, and he was becoming increasingly concerned for his family and his people.

On one such occasion, Miterienanka was nestled in a luxurious old, leather arm chair watching a television programme about overpopulation. Miterienanka had no idea that there were so many people in the world, the demands for space of which had resulted in the decline and extinction of so many other species. In most cases this was due to the destruction of their habitat but some losses had been due to being over-hunted.

The idea of extinction was not a new concept to Miterienanka; it was well understood by the Maasai that the lions of the Maasai Mara were in danger of disappearing. Poachers threatened the future of elephants and rhinos but, to Miterienanka, it was a shock to learn that people were responsible for so much destruction, and that many more creatures were on the brink of disappearing for ever. It seemed that many civilised people thought of wild animals as being entirely separate from humanity, having no real importance apart from being some sort of leisure ornament or sporting opportunity. He wondered at why people could not see that animals and all life depended on one-another and that humans were animals too.

Miss Mabel Mars, his old school teacher, had often spoken to the children about their immortal soul and, when she was asked if the other creatures on the Savannah had them, she had insisted that only people had souls. The villagers, including the children, knew from seeing them hunt for food and fight for territory and their mating rights, that this was a ridiculous notion. Even the little antelope mother would bravely risk her life in a desperate attempt to rescue her calf from the cheetah. Either there were souls or there were not. Now, though, Miterienanka began to realise just how uncaring and detached civilised people were from the wilderness. He also began to wonder how long it would be before the expanding human population turned the whole world into one big city with no wild animals at all.

As Miterienanka was musing, Gloria walked into the room and sat in another armchair, and they both watched the TV as a lady reporter began to read out a news item.

‘As Natalia Antelava reports later in ‘World News’ on Uzbekistan, where women have become the new target of one of the most repressive regimes on earth. She uncovers evidence that women are being sterilized, often without their knowledge, in an effort by the government to control the population. The programme speaks to victims and doctors and highlights the fear and paranoia that have made this such a difficult story to tell. Women have fled the country in order to escape the practice. Only a few brave Uzbeks

have been willing to speak, often telling horrific stories the government don't want told.'

Gloria was uncomfortable about the topic of the news item and began to strike up a conversation while the TV droned on in the background.

'Is everything al-right Miterree... Miterrenker... Sorry, I will get it right, just give me a little time,' Gloria stumbled.

'I am fine Mrs. Masters and, please, just call me Siri.'

Gloria smiled.

'Ah, short for Sironka, your first name, but, wasn't that your childhood name?'

'Yes,' confirmed Siri. 'But here, in England, I am still a child and I think Siri would be easier for people to pronounce.'

Gloria nodded in agreement.

'Yes, I'm sorry, but I think you're right, and Siri is a nice sounding name, it suits you.'

An awkward silence began to develop until Gloria suddenly thought of a related issue.

'What would you like to use for your family name,' Gloria asked?

'I would like to share your name, *Mastas*, if that is acceptable?

'Oh... Siri, that would make me very happy, but we really must do something about your accent.'

He rehearsed his new family name aloud until Gloria was satisfied that he pronounced it correctly.

'And Siri, how would you like to address me?'

'I would very much like you to be my English Yeyo,' Siri shyly answered. Gloria looked a little bewildered until Siri, realising his mistake, continued. 'Oh, I am sorry, that is Maasai for Mother. I meant Mother, if that is acceptable?'

Gloria chuckled with understanding and replied.

'Yes, of course, I think Yeyo is a very nice name. Yeyo,' she repeated. 'I will be your English, Maasai Mummy.'

They both laughed and Gloria stood to leave the room, but Siri quickly leaped out of his chair and hugged the surprised but happy

Gloria. Then, as quickly, he returned to his chair and continued to watch the news program.

Gloria was left standing, feeling the loving warmth of motherhood for the first time; an experience that her husband was unable to provide her. She remained standing and superficially watched the item of news with Siri, but hardly noticed the content.

Siri; however, was engrossed; he was absorbing all and any information on his new habitat that he could find.

The newsreader continued, ‘Police in Pakistan have arrested a Muslim cleric over claims he framed a Christian girl who has been held for several weeks under controversial anti-blasphemy laws. The Imam was detained after witnesses said he had torn pages from a Koran and placed them in her bag which had burned papers. She is accused of burning Islamic religious texts. There have been conflicting reports about Rimsha Masih’s age and her mental state. Some media have said she is eleven and suffers from Down’s syndrome.’

Meanwhile, Gloria had returned from her reverie and had become too uncomfortable with Siri watching, what she considered to be, unsuitable items on the news programme. She picked up the TV controller and found what she assumed was a children’s cartoon, called ‘South Park,’ but was actually from a controversial, adult satirical television series of the same name. The episode was called ‘Starvin Marvin’ which was about an Ethiopian child.

‘That’s better, much more suitable. Don’t you think so, Siri?’

He nodded and she left the room.

Naturally, at first, it was a very strange and alien environment for Siri but, as previously mentioned, thanks in part to the groundwork provided by Mabel, he quickly adapted to his new life.

Although Gloria and Ralph could easily afford to provide Siri with a private education, Gloria insisted, against Ralph’s wishes, that he attend a state run school. She felt that Siri would be provided with a better cultural balance that would be of more use in later years than if he was insulated from normal society within the grounds of a private educational facility. Unfortunately, being insulated from contemporary, normal society herself, Gloria had

little understanding of the reality of urban British society, when compared to her own sheltered existence.

Accordingly, Siri attended a local state school where he proved to be exceptionally bright and was generally very popular with both the teaching staff and students. He had robust preconceived expectations of English people from Mabel's frequent and nostalgic reminiscences, which had been reinforced during the weeks he had spent with Gloria and her circle of friends. He had expected the students to be polite and well behaved, and he was surprised to discover that many were aggressive and ignorant. Several of the girls had babies at home and others were pregnant, one as young as thirteen. When he asked who would provide for the girls and their babies, he was told 'No problem, the King will pay,' which seemed odd, as there was no king in the UK.

He was told by his classmates that, although the Muslim girls didn't generally behave in this way, several had visited Pakistan at fourteen or fifteen years of age and had not returned to school. Apparently it was most likely due to arranged marriages.

Two thirteen year old girls in his class had flirted with Siri but he avoided them as much as was possible. He was interested and he was certainly curious, but the Maasai didn't tolerate outsiders associating with their women, and he assumed that it would be wrong for him to behave differently. There seemed to be a complete lack of morality in the lives of many of these children whose highest hopes for the future seemed to rely on either winning the lottery, becoming a celebrity, or by selling illegal drugs.

Unfortunately, some of the boys were jealous of Siri's popularity and easy natural abilities, and one of his classmates persuaded his older brother, who attended the same school, to rough him up and humiliate him in front of his friends. However, due to Siri's martial skills, the tables were quickly turned and it was the bully who was made to look foolish.

This incident raised Siri's profile in the eyes of a group of troublesome youths who decided that he would be a useful addition to their gang. He attempted to avoid them but they persisted until,

tiring of his rejections, they turned on him and, for the first time in his life, Siri was truly frightened of other human beings.

Although Siri had previously faced wild animals and other children in conflict, he had never before experienced the thoughtless aggression produced by the unhealthy twisted minds of urban dwellers. He could understand something of the minds of wild creatures, but the urban gang members seemed unpredictably insane and dangerous, and it was almost impossible to avoid them.

After several months of attending the state school and a number of violent incidents, combined with an apparent lack of opportunity for Sironka to learn at his naturally rapid pace, Gloria gave up on her egalitarian approach to his education and agreed with Ralph to enrol him at Abingdon School. This was a prestigious private school dating back to the year 1256 and he quickly settled and overtook many of his classmates in most of the subjects studied within the first year. Mainly due to Siri's humility and generous nature, his classmates were openly full of admiration for his academic and sporting abilities, and many of them became good friends.

To Ralph's delight, Siri loved sailing and they spent many days at his Sailing Club in Ralph's Enterprise Class racing dinghy. Academically, Siri was particularly interested in ecology and he seemed to have a natural gift for spotting the obvious in a complex situation. On one occasion, when Siri was fourteen, he and Ralph were traversing the length of the reservoir in the dingy under a light wind, and Siri's clarity surfaced as he shared something with Ralph that had been on his mind.

'I heard a joke on the internet today by a Scotsman, a comedian called... I think he was called Frankie Boyle. He said that the best way for people to recycle their plastic shopping bags was to suffocate their children with them.'

'Did you think it was a good joke,' asked Ralph?

Siri concentrated for a moment before replying.

'I didn't understand it, but, I think I do now.'

'Go on,' encouraged Ralph.

‘I think he was saying that too many plastic bags are not the problem. The real problem is that there are too many people. I think he was making fun of people who believe that you can solve pollution by recycling plastic bags rather than by reducing the number of people and that is a stupid idea. Is that right father?’

‘I think you have it in a nutshell there Siri. And how would you solve the population crisis?’

Siri immediately answered, ‘Simple, do the same as the Chinese, one child families instead of one parent families.’

Ralph laughed out at Siri’s remark until he saw that the boy looked worried.

‘No Siri, I’m sure that you’re on the right track, it’s just that I hadn’t heard it put like that before.’

Siri brightened and asked.

‘Was *that* a good joke then?’

Ralph reached out and ruffled Siri’s hair.

‘Yes, I rather think it was but I wouldn’t repeat it to anyone. You might bring the Political Correct Police down upon us.’

‘Really?’ said Siri, looking very doubtful.

‘No, not really,’ Ralph reassured him. ‘Derogatory remarks have to be aimed specifically at people not belonging to the white heterosexual male community before the police get involved. But I think it’s safe, even fashionable in some circles to ridicule single parent families, as long as you don’t specify that the remaining parent is a woman.’

Siri was silent for a while he ran this through his mind.

‘So, according to these rules, the only people that can be safely criticized in the UK, are Englishmen like you, father,’ he said with a cheeky grin.

‘O dear,’ Ralph replied in mock seriousness, ‘Am I that obvious?’

The conversations between Siri and Ralph became increasingly frequent and almost drove Gloria to distraction as they discussed ever more complex issues. On one such occasion, Ralph tried to explain to Siri why humanity was having such a terrible time controlling its excesses and why the people in control of wealth

around the world appeared to be pushing so many others into poverty.

It was during the winter when they were doing some maintenance work on the dinghy in Ralph's garage-come-workshop. Siri, who by then had passed his fifteenth birthday, was depressed about the seemingly unstoppable destruction of the natural world. After discussing the issue for some time, Ralph stopped working on the boat and, turning, he placed a hand on each of Siri's shoulders as he looked into the boy's eyes.

'After billions of years of evolution,' he began, 'it's hardly surprising that living organisms, including human beings, are incapable of limiting their level of reproduction for altruistic reasons. If our ancestors had not been selfish and intensely competitive, we wouldn't be here today - it would be the descendants of other, more selfish and competitive individuals that would be here in our place. In fact, that was precisely what happened, and the possibility of a more gentle, considerate and intelligent human population has very likely been bred out of existence.'

Ralph could see that Siri was thinking deeply about what he had said, and he became worried that he was being too negative, and added, 'We may all be descended from tyrants, but each of us can choose whether or not to reach out and aspire to be a good person, but that is not necessarily the same as being an intelligent or well educated one. If you educate an intelligent but inherently selfish person, they will simply become more effective in their selfishness.'

It had not been Ralph's intentions but, from that moment, Siri felt the weight of the world upon his shoulders. If education was not the solution, where was the hope for the future? It was as if his responsibilities had been extended from simply saving the Maasai people to the salvation of the whole world.

Chapter VII

UNIVERSITY - 2016

Siri was enjoying a blessed life, living in a region of the UK, sheltered from the growing troubles and riots in less privileged urban areas and provided with a first class education. He had rapidly advanced his knowledge in the sciences at Abingdon School and, by the time he was sixteen, he had secured a place in New College University, Oxford.

Ralph and Gloria accompanied Siri on his first day and they were greeted in the Front Quad entrance by an old family friend, Sir Curtis Alexander Price. He was seventy years of age and the college Warden. Ralph and Gloria shook his hand in turn and, after conversing with the Masters, he turned to Siri.

‘And our new student Sironka Masters, of whom I have heard many promising things, and I am told I must call you Siri. Delighted to meet you at last Siri,’ he said as he shook Siri’s hand.

Siri was a little overwhelmed but remembered his manners.

‘It is good to meet you too Sir,’ he pronounced.

‘Well, for now, you wont be living with us,’ replied the Warden, ‘so I can’t show you your quarters but, maybe, when you’re eighteen, we’ll find a room for you. But we can allocate you a locker to keep your things safe. This way everyone.’

The warden led the way, and Siri had been launched on to the next level of his education.

Once Siri had settled down in his new place of study he began to explore the social life of the students. He was limited in his opportunities as he commuted each day from his home and, during their free time, a significant number of students seemed to mostly indulge in getting drunk in the city bars and nightclubs. This intrigued Siri but, as he had little to no opportunity to take part, he turned his interest towards finding a suitable sport.

After watching some members of the university’s fencing club, Siri decided that this was just the kind of sport to which he would be suited. After all, hadn’t he been taught a kind of fencing using a

Maasai spear by two of the most experienced fighters among his people? Fencing, he decided, would be just the thing for a Maasai warrior to master.

While he was studying the movements of two duellists in the sports hall, one of them noticed Siri's intense concentration on their match. He was Musab Ibn Umayr from Kurdistan, who was older but much shorter than Siri and was studying at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. His partner was Cyril Jackson Hatchet from Alabama in the US who, at six foot four, hansom and athletically built, fulfilled the Hollywood ideal of American manhood. He was studying international politics.

After the combatants had paused for a short rest, Musab ambled over and passed his foil, hilt first, to Siri.

'Fancy trying for yourself,' he asked?

'I've never even held a sword before,' Siri confessed. 'I doubt that I would be any good,' he lied. Secretly, Siri couldn't wait to put his training with a heavy spear to good effect with this new weapon which, by comparison, weighed virtually nothing.

The American brashly shouted, 'All you need is ignorance and confidence and success is assured.'

'I'm Musab and that mountain troll you see over there quoting, or more than likely misquoting, Mark Twain, is Hatch. You can wear my gear and take him on, and don't worry, he moves about as fast as a collapsing shed.'

'Maybe, but I can beat you any time,' retorted Hatch.

'In your dreams, Bigfoot,' said Musab.

Siri was confused by this abusive talk and was about to politely decline when he noticed that both of his new acquaintances were wearing huge grins, and he realized that the insults were just friendly rivalry.

Within a few minutes Siri was kitted out and standing opposite Hatch, with Musab standing to one side giving him instructions. Siri started by learning to salute his opponent.

'Yes, raise your sword arm to the vertical with the hilt just in front of your face, and then lower it to the right just like Hatch.'

Siri eagerly complied as he couldn't wait to show them what he could do.

'Now you may begin. En garde, Pret, and Allez!'

Time after time Siri made a valiant attempt to score on his opponent but without success. He was easily outmanoeuvred and beaten, and he felt foolish. He committed every ounce of his strength into his attacks until he became tired and dispirited at the ease with which Hatch was able to effortlessly avoid his strikes.

Musab could see Siri's mounting desperation and, stopping them, he put his arm around Siri's shoulders to reassure him.

'Don't be put off little guy, you're doing well, isn't he Hatch?'

'Sure, you had me sweating like a pig to keep out of trouble,' Hatch lied.

Musab stood in front of the deflated Siri with both hands resting upon his shoulders to command his attention.

'You have a big heart and just a little practice is needed to release the lion inside you'.

This comment instantly restored Siri's confidence and his smile once more returned. Hatch held out a huge hand and asked his name.

'Siri,' he replied as his own hand disappeared into Hatches huge palm and was shook vigorously.

'Nice to meet you Siri, I'm Cyril Hatchet but you can call me Hatch, everyone does. And this is Musab Ibn Umayr. Goes by the name Musab and, between you and me, I think he may well be a terrorist.'

'Take no notice of this infidel,' retorted Musab. 'His family live in the deep south of the US, own thousands of square miles of land and very likely still keep black slaves.'

Siri was shocked and, with his hand still trapped within Hatch's grasp, he felt very vulnerable. But, to his relief, the two quickly lost their composure and laughed at their outrageousness, and the making of three close friendships had begun.

Hatch and Musab were interested in both history and politics and were active members of 'The Sealed Knot,' a seventeenth century re-enactment society that covered the years of the English

Civil War during the mid seventeenth century. They became interested in this period after discovering that Oxford had been the headquarters of King Charles 1 between 1642 and 1646 during the conflict.

At first, they assumed that re-enacting battles would be a great opportunity to use their fencing skills on horseback. In practice; however, for reasons of safety whilst controlling half a ton of unruly animal in the midst of battle, they had to be content with simply tapping the blades of the opposition rather than engaging in competitive sword-play. Siri was fascinated to hear about their hobby and that King Charles 1 and his supporters had been housed in several of the university buildings in Oxford. Many of these still survived and could be seen by simply walking around the city centre, and some were even open for the public to visit.

Hatch was a born Royalist, and belonged to the Kings Cavalry, or Cavaliers, but Musab could not stomach supporting the royalist cause and had joined the Parliamentary Cavalry, better known as the Roundheads.

Siri accompanied his friends to an event and watched a battle re-enactment from the sidelines. He could see Hatch riding among the Cavaliers - he towered above his fellow troopers and was a born Cowboy, wildly waving his sword in the air. He was overenthusiastic and ill-disciplined and Siri frequently noticed him breaking ranks to pursue his own personal conflicts with members of the opposition. Musab; however, who was also a Polo enthusiast and used one of his own ponies during the re-enactments, rode with discipline and precision.

Siri was enthused by the spectacle and joined up with Hatch's Cavaliers but there remained a couple of obstacles. The first was that he had no equipment, and the second impediment was that he could not ride.

The lack of equipment was mostly solved by buying it ready made from specialist outfitters and supplies; however, some items were best made to measure by craftsmen and would be more difficult to acquire. The largest of these was the iron back and breast body armour that would have to be hand made. A good armourer

was found and when Siri tried it on, Hatch and Musab were delighted with the outcome. The armourer had gone to a great deal of effort to produce a first class job and the fittings included some polished brass plates on the leather shoulder straps which contrasted nicely with the polished black of the iron. It was a fine, authentic reproduction of the real thing and the armourer almost seemed to be reluctant to part with it.

The second obstacle presented a greater difficulty, Siri had no riding experience whatsoever and, worse still, when he began taking riding lessons it transpired that he was terrified of horses.

After the three of them had made several visits to the local riding stables, Siri had managed to hang on and allow his mount to follow, nose to tail, the rider in front but this was hardly good enough if he was ever to control a horse in a noisy, smoke filled battle field. After a particularly frustrating lesson at the stables, when it looked as if Siri was about to give up, Hatch decided it was kill or cure time and he turned to his two comrades and said, 'Whenever I feel the stale breath of civilisation blowing up my ass, I know just where to shake it off.'

The others were mystified, but agreed to follow Hatch's inspiration which was for the three of them to spend some time at a working ranch near Colorado Springs in the USA.

For some reason, Musab was unable to go due to some sort of business concern that had to be attended to, and only Hatch and Siri checked into the bunk-house for two weeks in the saddle. They rode Quarter Horses, the classic cowboy horse of the American mid west, shorter than an English Thoroughbred but tougher and better suited to hard and uneven ground.

By the time Siri had spent the third day of more than eight hours a day in the saddle with working cowboys, his body hurt so much he thought it would break. His fear of horses had been completely forgotten; superseded by an overwhelming desire for it all to stop. He tried to tell Hatch that he was not cut out for it and that, maybe, riding horses was just one of those things that black Africans were not cut out for. Hatch laughed, and pointed out that about a quarter of the original cowboys were blacks, and that he

should not be such a pussy. After Hatch's comment, Siri felt too ashamed to complain again and he endured his discomfort in silence.

After the first week, although he was still recovering from his blisters and bruises, he was also quickly adjusting to the way of life and thoroughly enjoying himself. Having grown to enjoy the experience, naturally, the remaining time at the ranch flew by and, all too soon, he was heading back to the UK.

After the commencement of the winter semester, the day to day routine of university life seemed pedestrian and dull and his discontent began to affect his work. Siri was now seventeen and, as Christmas approached, there was an abundance of opportunities to socialise and Siri's two friends, having noticed Siri's loss of enthusiasm, had decided that it was about time that they engineered a weekend for him in Oxford. Although Siri was still a few weeks under age for the legal consumption of alcohol, his friends had decided that it could be stretched a little, and it was about time he explored the possibilities of what he was legally old enough to experience.

Hatch and Musab knew their way around the Oxford student scene particularly well and, after some subtle enquiries, three attractive female acquaintances had agreed to spend some time with the boys as, apparently, the boys were "The right kind of people." Their names were Verity, Cosima and Talullah.

The weekend that the boys were planning would need some serious cash but this was a minor concern. Hatch's family were wealthy enough to provide him with an exorbitant allowance, and Musab always seemed to be well supplied with funds although it was a bit of a mystery where it came from. His friends suspected that his family was not particularly well off but he occasionally referred to an uncle who was connected to some sort of export and import business active in North Africa and the Middle East and it, somehow, seemed better not to ask.

They had decided to only partially tell Siri what they were planning, that they were going to take him for a meal followed by a Christmas pantomime. This was mostly for the sake of getting permission from his parents for him to spend the night away from

home, as the boys realised that Siri would be reluctant to lie if he was entirely aware of their intended activities. It was settled that they would meet up at midday at a hotel in Oxford the following Saturday.

Only at the last minute had Siri been informed that three girls would be accompanying them for the day and, after the lunch, which was a great success, a huge white limousine arrived to carry them from the hotel to the Oxford Playhouse theatre, leaving enough time for more drinks before settling for the performance. Being chauffeured in style along the two hundred yards between venues, instead of walking, seemed bizarre to Siri, but he had long ago given up expecting anything predictable or normal from his two friends.

During the show the girls were bedecked in flashing plastic coronets, and they waved luminous wands while the boys simply bathed in the company of three extremely lively and attractive young women. And during the sing-along interval, when it was 'Girls versus the Boys,' they could have competed on their own; such was the abandoned enthusiasm with which they all took part.

After the performance, as they passed through the entrance doors into the fresh air, their limousine was once again waiting for them with the chauffeur standing to one side of two adjacent open doors. By now, still aglow from alcohol, Siri had decided not to even try to guess what was next on the agenda but rather to simply sit back and enjoy whatever arrangements his friends had or had not made for them.

The limousine whisked them away through the Oxfordshire countryside to a five star hotel, Belmond Le Manoir, set in the outskirts of a picturesque village where reservations had been made for the three best suites offered, each one complete with lounge, super king sized beds and a private garden. Each suite was supplied with a fully stocked drinks cabinet and a table displaying an exotic buffet. Flowers and Christmas decorations were in abundance and, in the largest suite, a karaoke machine and a huge TV had been provided, where all the pillows and cushions they could find from the three apartments were quickly scattered over the floor.

After relaxing over a few drinks, Hatch tipped out a large suitcase. It contained six costumes, three male, and three female, and he announced that everyone was to select a costume, take a shower and return to the lounge with their new identity.

The boys returned as the three kings from the Nativity, complete with ornamental boxes and vases. These supposedly contained gold, frankincense and myrrh but actually held hash, cocaine and condoms. The boys looked splendid in their costumes, especially Musab and Siri whose dark complexions made them look even more authentic, although far too young, and neither possessed any semblance of a beard. Hatch, on the other hand, looked like a huge, square jawed white American dressed up in an exotic costume which, of course, was exactly what he was. The girls were dressed in Arabian harem silks and, in spite of them all looking stunningly beautiful, they accused Hatch of being sexist, to which he wholeheartedly agreed. Musab had smuggled in a huge oriental hubble-bubble, and soon they were sharing a sample from Hatch's box of gold.

After playing with the karaoke and becoming more intoxicated, Hatch suggested they play a game which consisted of the player being blindfolded and, by using only their mouth on whatever part of the anatomy that was offered, they would have to attempt to identify a member of the opposite sex.

At this time, Verity knelt up, raised her arm and loudly announced in a slurred and disjointed fashion, 'I can see, where this is leading. What assurance, do we girls have, that our interests and, welfare, are your prime concern?'

At this point, the other two girls giggled uncontrollably.

Hatch and Siri were perplexed until Musab produced his jar marked myrrh and, opening it, extracting a condom which he presented to Verity. She carefully unravelled it and, with an expression of disapproval, she twanged it across the room.

'We *won't* be needing any of those things, for a start!' she proclaimed, much to the consternation of the boys. 'I, for one, do not intend to be,' she paused to find her words, and her balance before continuing, 'let down, left wanting...'

The other two Girls giggles became lightly seasoned with embarrassment as Verity continued, ‘...Left, high and dry!’

At this the other two girls burst out laughing and the boys, already confused and slow-witted, had become a little dismayed as to what Verity was leading up to. But their fears were to be dispelled as she produced a small packet from somewhere and took out three, small blue pills. They were, of course, what are commonly known as Viagra.

‘If you guys wanna continue with this game, take these... One each!’ she commanded as she thrust them across to Musab who smiled with understanding. The other two boys were still a little mystified but, as Musab passed one to each of them, he gave a reassuring nod and they copied his example and washed the pills down with some wine.

‘Good, and I do believe it’s my turn,’ said Verity, and the game continued.

The order of play very quickly became confused but in spite of the confusion, no-one missed a turn.

They awoke in the morning to find themselves sober, naked, and in a tangle of bedding across the floor. Apart from Siri, whose life in Africa had not imbued him with a fear of nakedness in public, they were all feeling a little awkward and were wondering how they could recover their clothes whilst retaining some dignity. But, upon waking, Siri joyfully jumped up naked before all and declared, ‘Now I am truly worthy of a chief’s son. I have killed a lion, faced down my enemies and now I have shared beautiful women with my brothers in arms.’ He threw his hands high into the air in exhilaration and shouted, ‘Engai Narok, thank you for my body and my friends, I am indeed a lucky hunter’.

To this outburst, Hatch shouted, ‘You mean, you’re a Lucky Fucker.’ and all but Siri laughed at the jibe.

‘Vulgaire enfant!’ Siri pronounced in fluent French.

‘Show off!’ replied Musab, who had a good working knowledge of French.

‘What did he say,’ asked Hatch.

Siri, attempting to impersonate the stance and voice of Stephen Fry, addressed the room.

‘My dear boy, some of us Spear Chuckers benefited from a superior education, unlike you plodding Neanderthals.’

Hatch threw a cushion at him, which started a massive pillow fight, and modesty was forgot by all amid their joy of life and laughter.

Later that day, after the boys had escorted the ladies home, the three young men were engaged in a lively discussion on the first floor of a café in Oxford, overlooking some of the city’s beautiful Baroque architecture. They were ravenous and tucking in to a full English breakfast. As they were nearing completion of the meal with copious amounts of tea and marmalade on toast, they began to regain the ability of speech.

‘What a night!’ said Hatch.

The others were still occupied with eating but nodded their approval of the diagnosis.

‘I mean, what a night!’ Hatch repeated, and again the others were in agreement.

Not satisfied with their mute replies, Hatch turned to Musab and slapped him on the back for attention as he was finishing up the last morsel.

‘Hey, Musab, you’re religious and all that alcohol, does this mean you have to confess or something?’

Musab nearly choked before he recovered sufficiently to reply.

‘No! I’m sure God has more than enough to cope with listening to you Christians.’

Question mark adjustment ‘And the drugs,’ Hatch whispered?

Musab placed his cutlery carefully across his now empty plate and decreed.

‘The instructions we receive are "Satan’s plan is to sow hatred and enmity amongst us with intoxicants and gambling". Also, every intoxicant is khamr, which translates as wine, and every intoxicant is haraam, which means unlawful. We know alcohol can be worthy of this condemnation and opium certainly qualifies. Hashish, on the

other hand, well, I can't remember sowing any hatred and enmity amongst you last night, quite the reverse.'

The other two chuckled but Musab continued without mirth, 'As for the women, we are ordered not to allow our seed to fall to the ground and I can assure you both that, last night, I complied most vigorously with this commandment.'

The other two were almost in stitches with laughter, but Musab continued again in all seriousness, but louder, 'God gave mankind intelligence, and the power to choose between fates, and I choose to use these gifts wisely.'

'Bravo,' shouted Hatch.

Musab had the humility to look a little sheepish at this reaction but quickly recomposed himself.

'And you Hatch, as the good Catholic that I know you are, will you be attending confession to cleanse your mortal soul?'

Hatch stood, affected a stately pose with thumbs behind imaginary lapels, and pronounced in his Southern drawl, 'Hell no! What sins? Since when has it been a sin for a citizen of the United States of America to pursue a state of wealth, health, happiness and personal gratification, regardless of the consequences?'

He dropped back into his chair to the accompaniment of laughter but, after they had settled down again, Musab asked, 'What of you Siri, how would our escapades last night comply with the morality of your Stone Age culture?'

Siri pondered for a moment, and then pronounced in all seriousness, 'Perfectly!'

To which Musab exclaimed, 'Shameless barbarian!' Then he continued, 'Let us three swear to our respective gods, Allah, Some Black Devil and The False Nazarene Prophet, to be always, *Brothers in Arms!*'

Musab stood, raising his mug of tea, and the other two followed his example. Then, reaching across the table, they clinked their mugs, and all three exclaimed together, '*Brothers in Arms!*'

Siri could have contacted his family via the internet or by mobile phone at any time but he had been so preoccupied with his

new life that he had given little thought towards his homeland and hadn't bothered to keep his parents properly informed about his progress. This neglect had not gone unnoticed by his father, Olamayiani, who had greater expectations from his son even though he refused to have anything to do with electronic communications of any sort. He was beginning to regret agreeing to Siri leaving the village, and he turned his frustration towards Lankenuna who he suspected had somehow orchestrated the whole adoption business. He finally became so concerned and resentful at having agreed to his wife's plotting that he visited her hut to lambaste her.

'Wife, I feel that I have lost Miterienanka and you are to blame. I should never have listened to you and the Christian woman.'

'I do not think so husband,' she coolly replied. 'He is well and I don't doubt that he will be back soon enough.'

'I have our people to care for and yet I have put the welfare of the boy first.' Olamayiani lamented. 'Now that Miterienanka has left the village to be educated, I am being pestered by some of the parents to arrange for their children to do the same. They think that if their daughters attend the city schools, they will also marry in the cities and get larger dowries in return. Are these people blind as well as stupid?'

Lankenuna was having none of it, and replied, 'And why shouldn't the girls be educated in the city schools? Anyway, you were the one who decided that Miterienanka should go, and I am sure that he will remember his duties to his family.'

Olamayiani felt he had just cause to be concerned about the future of his people and he began to explain to Lankenuna.

'You don't see it do you? If the girls do not wish to return, the boys will have no wives and what do you think will happen then?'

Before Lankenuna could reply he continued.

'The young men will become uncontrollable. Many will leave to go to the cities and we will not be able to hold our land against our enemies. Our traditions are as they are for good reason and if we hold with tradition we will endure, but if our proven ways are not followed the Maasai will lose their freedoms.'

Lankenuna understood well enough, but she was more pragmatic about what the future may hold for the Maasai. It had become clear to her that the world was irresistibly changing and they would eventually have to adapt to the changes in order to survive, and education seemed to be the best option available. However, she felt pity for Olamayiani and the burden of responsibility that he carried for the people.

She persuaded him to sit and served him a drink of milk and, while he drank, she sought to deflect him from his worries by giving him an additional one, along with a small task.

‘Husband, there is no more that you can do and no-one can accuse you of failing to do your very best for your people. But as you are so concerned about your duties as headman, there is one that you have overlooked which is well within your power to rectify. You have *three* wives. I am content, and Nalangu does not complain, but your youngest, Lilo, is very young and needs a husband’s touch. Further more, you spend far too much time under my feet, and you disrupt my work.’

Olamayiani turned to face his wife.

‘Nalangu seems to have managed quite well without my attentions for some time,’ he accused. ‘At any rate, she has produced a son and a daughter without my help, unless I’ve been sleepwalking these past five years,’ he added with sarcasm but, he then confessed with resignation, ‘I have long finished with love work Lankenuna.’

‘Then you should not have married Lilo!’ she retorted.

Olamayiani turned and cast an angry look at his wife and, for a moment, she thought he would stand and strike her but, when he looked into her eyes, his mood quickly softened.

‘You are right,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t know what I was thinking when I decided to have her.’

‘I think we both know why you took Lilo for your third wife,’ Lankenuna answered.

Olamayiani looked at his wife with suspicion and asked, ‘Really, why don’t you tell me woman?’

‘You married the girl because the teacher wouldn’t have you. As if a civilised woman would want to marry a moth-eaten old lion

like you,' she scoffed, and then continued. 'So, in frustration you took her star pupil instead, and now you don't have any time for her. There was a time when you couldn't be stopped giving babies to the young women...'

'Stop woman,' Olamayiani pleaded. 'For pity's sake leave me in peace, you become more like my mother with each day.'

Lankenuna smiled and replied soothingly, 'It is the boy in you Olamayiani that I have always loved, and boys sometimes need the guidance of a mother.'

Olamayiani was subdued. He tried to speak but Lankenuna pressed home her advantage.

'Go to Liloe. Make her happy. She could give you another son.'

Olamayiani shook his head and smiled at her and said, 'You are a strange one Lankenuna, but finding you was not the worst day's work of my life.'

Romantic comments are not common among the Maasai and Lankenuna dearly loved her husband, but he wasn't going to get away with deflecting her purpose.

'Go to her, Olamayiani, and be the lion that I once knew.'

As he gazed at his wife, the look of desire grew in his eyes and Lankenuna stepped back from him with annoyance and commanded.

'Away with you, Olamayiani, go to the wife that wants you inside her. I have no time for your hungry eyes.'

She then turned and strutted away from him, with an expression of smug satisfaction on her face. She had awoken the lion in Olamayiani and she sincerely hoped that he would find his way to his youngest wife before it dozed off again.

Chapter VIII

THE FUTILITY OF REGRET - 2018

Siri was eighteen and had worked hard at his studies during the previous two years at university. The time seemed to have flown by and, one morning in late autumn, when Ralph failed to arrive in the dining room for breakfast, Gloria asked Siri to, 'Nip up to his bedroom and see what was keeping him.' Siri instinctively knew, even before he tapped on his stepfather's door, that he was dead and, as he slowly pushed aside the door, a sense of lifelessness engulfed him. From the doorway he could see the silhouette of Ralph's slack face outlined against the lace curtains in the morning light. Siri's toes sank into the deep piled carpet as he slowly walked to his adopted father's bedside. Tentatively, he reached out and laid his hand on Ralph's forehead, which was alarmingly cold. He quickly snatched his hand away and returned to the kitchen. When Gloria saw his grave expression, he tried to speak but was unable to find any words, but simply stood in apologetic silence. Her morning smile evaporated and a tea towel slipped to the floor as she brushed past him and rushed upstairs.

A few days later, after all the arrangements had been made for the funeral, Siri told Gloria that he wouldn't be there. Gloria; however, would not accept his refusal and for two days she constantly nagged at him until, for the first and only time, Siri was angry with her. He pointed out that Ralph had gone and there was nothing to be gained in attending a ceremony for the disposal of the body. A funeral simply provides an opportunity for those who knew him to assuage any guilt they might feel for any shortcomings in their friendship. He had loved Ralph as his father and would miss him dearly but he had no regrets about their relationship and there was no need for him to apologise to a dead body in the company of those, who very likely, should have been better friends.

Naturally there was a funeral, by which time Siri had relented and was in attendance. But as Gloria met each of the guests she couldn't help but recall Siri's cruel words and she wondered what

aspect, if any, of their relationship with Ralph they regretted. She was certainly aware of all of her regrets which burned like a low fire in the pit of her stomach. She had rerun Siri's outburst in her mind many times and, looking back, she could see a perfectly good marriage that had been poisoned by Ralph's indiscretion followed by her fear and jealousy. It may have been irrational, after all, Mabel had been living in another continent throughout her marriage, but on a deeper, emotional level, the damage that had been done to their relationship had proved to be insurmountable.

Living with Siri had been a two-way process, whilst Gloria had given Siri many civilised skills and refinements, living with someone from a pre-industrial way of life had led Gloria to question many of the values that she had held dear. She could now see how she had settled for a relationship with her husband that was without juice, tasteless and without sustenance. The clarity of Siri's simple Maasai understanding of the finality of death had brought some insight into her domesticated misunderstanding of the true value of living for the moment.

After her lunch, the following day, she faced up to the task of packing Ralph's clothes away into boxes for the local Oxfam Shop. She lifted one of his favourite winter pullovers and clutched it to her face. She could smell him in the wool and, for the first time following his death, she felt the full force of her loss. She just wanted to be in Ralph's arms again and tell him how much she loved him, had admired him and had been so very proud of her wonderful, handsome husband. But Siri was right, no matter how elaborate the funeral had been it was too late. With her face buried in his clothing and his scent filling her mind she sank to her knees, her forehead to the floor and, starting as a low whimper, her lamentations built in volume until she wailed uncontrollably into the darkness. Unable to stay upright, her body slumped sideways to the floor and curled up into a defensive ball where she lay until she had sobbed herself to exhaustion.

At only fifty-seven years of age it was a premature death. Even with a heart condition, with the benefit of western medicine, Ralph should have enjoyed many more years of life. For Siri, the idea of a

Maasai dying in his fifties was quite normal. His true father Olamayiani was sixty-seven, which was a remarkable age for a Maasai warrior to achieve, but Siri knew that his father had always ignored convention and wouldn't die until he was good and ready.

The loss of Ralph was the loss of a foundation stone in Siri's life, as they had shared many interests and become very close over the six years since his adoption. As the weeks following the funeral passed by, Siri lost interest in his studies, and Gloria became increasingly worried until she consulted his tutor. He agreed that Siri's work was suffering but reassured her that, even without a traumatic experience, it was not unusual for overseas students to go through some sort of depression during their education. He suggested that some time spent at home amongst his own family might prove to be the right therapy for his recovery and renewed enthusiasm for his studies and, accordingly, it was arranged for him to fly to Tanzania for a few weeks.

It depended, of course, on Siri agreeing and there was a part of Gloria that dreaded suggesting this. What if he left and didn't wish to return? The thought of losing Siri tied Gloria's stomach into knots, but something had to be done to shake him out of his depressed state. Also, Gloria and Ralph had promised his father that Siri would return if he was unhappy in England. The whole prospect was torturing her and, during breakfast one morning, she decided to raise the subject but, she thought, 'not until later, maybe over dinner'.

That evening they were dining formally and, as usual, Gloria insisted on only communicating in French during the evening mealtime. Siri, as often happened, had forgotten his table manners and was cracking open the bone from a chicken leg with his teeth in order to get at the sweet marrow inside. Unusually, Gloria had failed to immediately notice his indiscretion as she was in torment over the prospect of suggesting to Siri that he might like to visit his family.

'Please, mind your table manners Siri.'

'I'm sorry Yeyo,' Siri replied, and he began to make excuses when the house phone rang. Siri rose from his seat to answer it in an attempt to redeem himself, but Gloria smiled and waved him back as she left her seat in order to answer it in the hallway. After

overhearing the exchange of a few words, the door was pushed closed, and Siri could only hear a muffled and sombre conversation which he could not decipher.

After replacing the phone, Gloria stood silently for a moment. She knew that she couldn't have found the strength to suggest to Siri that he should visit his homeland, and now she was left with no alternative but to directly tell him the truth. Although she would have dearly loved to protect him from any additional bad tidings, it almost felt as if fate had not trusted her and had intervened.

She returned to the dining room.

'Siri, that was a message from your home,' she said. 'Your poor father is very ill and would like to see you as soon as possible.'

Reclining in a business class seat on a direct flight to Kilimanjaro Airport, Siri was in a restless nightmarish sleep.

He is surrounded by a hellish, stinking bog that extends into the distance in every direction and, as he looks down through the putrefied dark pools, he sees bubbles rising from a tangle of corpses that release putrid green vapour into the atmosphere. Surrounded by the bleached, concrete bones of ruined urban habitats, abandoned by millions of dead beneath a desert sun, Siri walks to a beach where windblown human skulls skitter past him to the distant sound of children at play as a red ocean crashes through heaped beds of rotting seaweed.

He is trapped in his nightmare of death and confusion and he begins to fear for his sanity but, before he is lost, he sees his father's strong, calm face. Olamayiani is seated and gazing at the distant horizon across the African savannah. He turns his head to face Siri. He is old, so very old and fragile. He speaks.

'Miterienanka, I can do no more and our people need you.'

Siri awoke, sweating, his heart pounding and, for a moment, he was confused and knew not where he was. A stewardess was standing over him with a look of concern but, after being reassured that it was just a bad dream, she left to find him a cold drink. Siri was badly shaken up by his visions which were all too real, and he made a point of keeping awake during the remainder of his journey.

When Siri arrived at his village, he was welcomed by many of his old friends who all wanted to ask about his life in England, but he hurried on as quickly as possible to his father's hut to find his mother standing outside waiting for him. Together, they entered Olamayiani's hut where Liloé was kneeling beside Olamayiani, tending to his needs.

It was the first time Siri had seen Liloé since his triumphant return with the hunting party, which seemed like half a lifetime ago, and he understood now why she had been kept isolated, away from the village boys, having set aside for marriage with his father, she was even more beautiful than he remembered.

Olamayiani, wearing only a loincloth and in the midst of a fever, lay still upon his hide bed. The whole of his body glistening with moisture as Liloé used a cloth and a bowl of water in an attempt to cool him and ease his discomfort. When she noticed that Siri and his mother had entered the hut, she moved away to allow them to come closer.

Olamayiani opened his eyes as Siri knelt beside him. Siri was deeply shocked to see his father in such poor health, so thin and frail, a man that had always been easily spotted amongst lesser men by his massive build and his commanding presence. Siri had never seriously considered his father's death, although he realised that death must eventually come to us all, such had been the vitality and presence of Olamayiani.

But now he lay helpless and in great pain, and his lips trembled as his eyes pleaded to Siri from within his stricken body. Siri leant forward to hear his father's words which were little more than a sigh.

'Is that you Miterienanka?'

'Yes Father!'

'They are taking our land for the foreigner. They kill all before them but do not eat. The Government burn our homes and beat our people. I cannot fight them any more my son.'

With all of his diminished strength, Olamayiani gripped Siri's shoulders and pulled himself up a little.

'My son!'

Although Siri manfully maintained a stiff upper lip, his fathers despair was tearing his heart out. He tried to comfort him; a shadow of a once inspirational leader.

‘I will do whatever I can Father!’

‘Good... good!’

Olamayiani collapsed back onto his bed, closed his eyes, and slipped into unconsciousness.

Siri and his mother left Liloe to continue her efforts to ease Olamayiani’s suffering, but he was not to reawaken.

Once outside the hut, Siri lost his composure and wept, childlike. His mother tentatively reached out and softly touched his shoulder, giving what comfort she could without shaming her son, but he longed to be in England with Yeyo who would not have hesitated to enfold him in her protective arms.

Lankenuna had relieved Liloe from her duties during the night and, upon waking, she could see that Olamayiani was unnaturally still. She laid her hand upon his body which felt cold. In spite of the many times that she touched a body and had felt the chill of death, she felt the shock travel up her arm and into her heart.

The Maasai dead are put out on the savannah for the wild animals to consume as, with no concept of rebirth, they consider that a dead body is empty and of no further use and the practice of burying bodies to rot in the ground is considered to be a defilement of the earth. However, Chiefs are allowed the special privilege of a burial and, later the same day, Olamayiani’s body was lowered into a grave.

The whole village was in attendance, with Olamayiani’s family at the forefront. Mabel stood a little to the rear and, although she maintained a show of British reserve amid the wailings and lamentations from the native women, she grieved, not only for the man that she had learned to respect, but also for the man that she had secretly grown to love, and the life that had been forbidden by her faith.

Liloe, who had no children to supervise, had manoeuvred herself around the mourners to stand beside Siri. She surreptitiously slipped her hand into his and he clasped it tightly, until she noticed

Lankenuna glaring at her. Pulling her hand from his, she felt shame, but remained at his side.

That night, soon after Siri had retired alone to his bed in the hut constructed for him by his mother, Liloë came to him. Standing next to his buffalo hide-bed, she slipped off her blanket and, in her nakedness, she lay beside him. He was already awake and aware that it was Liloë from when she had first entered the hut, and he turned and drew her intoxicating body beneath him.

The moon was at her zenith for Liloë and she burned to be loved. Drawing up her knees, Siri easily sank into her and he abandoned any thought of restraint. She clamped him tightly against her with her legs and hungrily consumed his body and they passed into oblivion together. It was thus, as they were completely detached from the world about them, that Lankenuna had peered through the hut's entrance.

At their first meeting at Olamayiani's bedside, Lankenuna had realised that Liloë and Siri were attracted to one another and she had been expecting Liloë to visit her son during the night. She had lain awake in her hut waiting to intercept footsteps in the dark but Liloë had been very careful not to be detected and, having only been alerted by their noisy lovemaking, Lankenuna had been too late to prevent this disrespect to her husband. But, as she watched the young couple made one, her mind turned once more to her husband and she was unable to disturb them, and left them to their business.

Unaware of their secret visitor, the couple lay exhausted for a while until Liloë began to tease Siri, who readily responded to her touch. She knelt across him and slowly rocked, lost in her pleasure. Siri watched the silhouette of Liloë's body as she surged back and forth. He could just make out her swaying breasts in the low light and he cupped them, stroking the nipples between his fingers. In a strange way, relaxed and passive, he was more the watcher than a participant and, through his temporally diminished lust, he felt only kindness and compassion for Liloë's lost years with his father.

As Liloë stiffened and arched her body down, she fought to remain silent and unheard but, she failed to suppress a wail of ecstasy which pieced the night and, with her passion assuaged and

her body glistening with sweat in the low light, she lay forward and snuggled onto Siri's chest. His arms tenderly encompassed her and he traced the lines of her body with his finger tips and, for a short time, they slept.

Back in her bed Lankenuna, whilst not condoning their actions, accepted that although, strictly speaking, wives became the property of a dead mans brother, why not? Mrjooli and Tonkei had more than enough to contend with, and at least Liloë was getting some long overdue male attention. With these thoughts she fell asleep with memories of a young Olamayiani and Lankenuna sharing their lives together, and she dreamt of her husband's tenderness when they were alone, so unlike the stern and sometimes fearsome warrior known by others that had protected and guided his people for so many years.

Chapter IX

HUNTING THE HUNTERS

Siri returned from Tanzania shortly before Christmas and he was surprised to find some smashed shop windows and a burned scar from a vehicle fire in the centre of Oxford. Some of the city's university students had been involved, along with several anarchist groups and the anti globalist movement, in organising a mass demonstration which had got out of control. It seemed to Siri as if, following Ralph's death, madness and grief were becoming an ever bigger part of his life. One of Ralf's comments sprang to mind, "We have imported the troubles of the world!"

He reimmersed himself in the academic and social life of his university, but the relatively carefree Maasai boy had been replaced with a very worried and unhappy young man.

He found some respite from his worries when in the company of Hatch and Musab, although Hatch was increasingly busy with his studies which left little time for socialising. Musab mostly enjoyed fencing and playing chess for recreation, but Siri was no player, however, at fencing, he had become almost unbeatable.

On one occasion, Siri and Musab were fencing in the sports hall, and Siri was being particularly aggressive. He easily overcame Musab three times in succession, the last attack being delivered with such force that Musab lost his footing in retreat and fell heavily backwards. Siri removed his mask and offered his hand to Musab, who complained.

'You were going at it a bit hard Siri. Have I done something to offend you because if I -'

'No, not at all Musab,' Siri interrupted. 'I just have things on my mind, that's all. Sorry.'

After sharing three years of friendship together, Musab knew Siri well enough to recognise that something serious was worrying him and, if at all possible, he wanted to help. He managed to persuade Siri to join him for dinner that evening.

They had been eating pasta, washed down with several bottles of red wine, when Musab judged the time right to make some enquiries into his friend's state of mind.

'I heard about your father. Is that it? Is that what's been getting you down?'

Siri turned to his concerned friend and gave a small smile of reassurance as he replied.

'Related, but no. Neither my father's death nor my adopted father's death; for them their troubles are over. No, it's anxiety for the living that troubles me. My people in Tanzania remain under threat of eviction from their land.'

Musab had forgotten that Siri had recently lost two fathers. Multiple wives were commonplace in Islamic society, but having two fathers was a situation that would never arise.

'Forgive me Siri; I'd forgotten that you were very close to your adopted father in the UK.'

Siri waved away his apology and they continued to consume the last of their wine.

At the table nearest to them a crowd of students, with whom they were vaguely familiar, were noisily enjoying their evening together. One of them, a young, attractive looking boy, turned in his seat and persisted in attempting to engage Siri in conversation, completely failing to take Siri's increasingly forceful hints that he wasn't interested. As the boy's persisted, Siri became increasingly angry and frustrated at his alcohol fuelled doggedness and lack of good manners and, largely due to Siri being very drunk, he finally lashed out in a rare show of anger.

'Just fuck off will you, you bent bastard!' he shouted.

The surrounding clientele fell silent in shock at this unacceptable breach of political correctness. The boy was visibly shaken and turned away in his chair and was plainly fighting to hold back his tears. Outraged by Siri's outburst, an attractive girl, sitting at the boy's table, rose in defence of her friend and fellow student. Standing, she began to give Siri a tongue lashing lecture about prejudice and homophobia.

As her anger assaulted his ears, Siri also stood and, as he did so, his head swam from the excess wine that he had consumed. Even so, as he regained his focus, the girl appeared to be outstandingly attractive. And, although she was acting in defence of her friend, it was obvious that the young boy in question was further embarrassed and just wanted it all to stop.

‘I hate people who are prejudiced against others, just because they don’t fit in to their idea of normality. And what’s wrong with being approached by an admirer? You should be flattered!’

This was all too much for Siri, he had just wanted to be left in peace and had done nothing to deserve this unwanted attention. He voiced his immediate reaction.

‘OK, if you care so much about your friend’s love life, why don’t you let him take *you* up the arse?’

At this outburst, it seemed that the whole restaurant fell silent. Some of those nearby who’d witnessed the exchange were sniggering, others were shocked. The girl was temporally silenced and, in spite of her efforts, she was unable to prevent the humiliated boy from running out of the restaurant into the street. Her face was bloodless and withdrawn in anger. She was determined to belittle Siri in return for the hurt, offence and embarrassment that he had caused and she drew herself up to her full height of five feet four and a half inches in preparation to put Siri in his place.

‘When someone has a problem with gay people,’ she began, ‘it’s usually because they’re frightened of their own sexuality, by their attraction to the same sex but they haven’t the guts to do anything about it.’

Like an enraged cobra she had almost spat the last few words but it was a wasted gesture. His inebriated mind had barely registered her hostility.

She was wearing a low cut dress but he was careful to focus onto her face as he made a clumsy pass at her.

‘I don’t suppose you would care to join me for lunch sometime, would you? To discuss our genital orientations?’

‘Not if you were the last man on campus,’ she replied, ‘Dammed homophobic, misogynist ignoramus. People like you should be, be... Reported!’

Siri attention had become dominated by her sensual lips, her words flowing around him like white thighs. But it occurred to him that, without some sort of supporting evidence, homophobic and misogynist are not the ingredients of a rational argument. He struggled to remember his passing interest in philosophy. An ‘ad hominem,’ or... was it a case of ‘Ignoratio elenchi?’ He gave up the struggle to remember Aristotle on the nature of fallacies and replied, ‘So that’s a no then. No problem, it wouldn’t have worked out anyway,’ and he turned, carefully lowering himself back into his seat.

The girl closed her mouth and looked around in exasperation at her studious looking male companions seated at their table. Realising that her friend was out there, somewhere, feeling hurt and humiliated, she bit down her pride and left the restaurant to find him, in what she hoped was a dignified manner.

Almost immediately the remaining members of her party collected their coats and belongings and seemed to have a problem passing Siri’s table without bumping into it with the occasional barely audible murmur of, ‘*Bastard!*’

When the on looking customers had finally decided that the show was over and they had returned to their own conversations once more, Musab spoke.

‘Are you Okay?’ he said with a grin on his face.

‘Yes, sorry. I didn’t mean to get angry but...’ and Musab started to laugh.

‘No problem, if it had been me I would have been worse. Back home they can be stoned to death for attempting to corrupt other men. He had it coming.’

Siri shrugged.

‘You know, *you* can be a bastard sometimes,’ he said.

Musab stopped looking amused and became quite serious.

‘These people don’t know they’re born. If they lived outside of this privileged community, this insulated society, they would either

have to be more careful about flaunting their sexuality or suffer the consequences. I don't have to tell you of all people that the whole human rights nonsense is an illusion to placate irritating minorities, and political correctness simply promotes the power of the state under the disguise of protecting their interests.'

Siri nodded and smiled as he said.

'I forget sometimes how crazy you people are!'

Musab grinned, elbowed his friend in the ribs, and replied.

'Fucking spear chuckers, they shouldn't be allowed into the company of civilized men.'

'You're probably right. I feel really bad about humiliating that boy,' said Siri. 'The way things are it was really bad timing on his part. I hope I get the chance to apologise sometime.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Musab. 'But what about the girl, did you really mean it about not working out?'

'I don't know what I meant'

Musab leered as he warned, 'She was okay, I suppose. But, these days, western women are far too dangerous to mess with. As you know, on the whole, I am generally in favour of attractive Western women.' He laughed at his own weak joke before continuing, 'Seriously though, of course I care for them but, rather like my Polo ponies, they can be unreliable and skittish sometimes. My advice would be, keep away from the indigenous as, if you get too involved, they can take you for everything you have!'

Siri slowly shook his head from side to side.

'God help the fair sex if you lot succeed in imposing Sharia law in the West,' he said.

'I'll drink to that,' said Musab, 'and we should leave now, in case someone *does* report you to the cultural police.'

'Are you serious?' asked Siri.

Musab sighed, 'Don't you follow national events? You can be arrested and charged under a multitude of sins under the heading of human rights for saying or doing anything that may cause offence, although you would have been safe enough if it had just been a straight white guy. But it was a sodomite and a woman, we should leave,' and they drained their glasses and did so.

They made their way through the still busy centre of Oxford and, as they wandered in silence, Siri was full of regret for his behaviour in the restaurant. The girl had been right and it was completely out of character for him to behave so badly. He decided that he would make three new-year resolutions: Firstly, never again would he drink to excess; secondly, never again would he lose control of his mouth and; thirdly, he would find someone special and have a steady relationship, as single males and alcohol are a dangerous mix.

Musab could see that Siri was deep in thought and, after wandering through the city night for a while, when Siri seemed ready to talk, Musab returned to their earlier conversation.

‘You said that your people were in trouble, Siri, how do you mean, in what way?’

Siri stopped walking, took a deep breath and turned to face Musab as his worries poured out in an emotional rush of frustration.

‘The respective governments in Kenya and Tanzania are gradually forcing my people off the savannah to make room for agriculture, mineral exploitation and the valuable sale of hunting rights. The hunting is being leased to Arab hunting syndicates and nothing has helped. International petitions, conservationists and western governments, all have been ignored...’

Musab could see tears beginning to form in Siri’s eyes as he became increasingly distraught.

‘...and any financial help we get is easily overridden by the enormous wealth of the oil rich Arab states. I promised my father I would do something to help but what can I do, Musab? I don’t know what to do.’

They had reached a small ornamental park near a river, and Musab put an arm round his distressed friend’s shoulders to guide him to a nearby bench.

‘Ah yes, I understand,’ said Musab as they sat. ‘Tell me Siri, do you believe in God?’

‘Which one?’

With no hint of amusement, Musab continued, ‘There is only the one god Siri, you know that. And, as there is but one god, all names refer to the almighty.’

Siri realised that his friend was in earnest, and he replied, ‘I was educated by a Christian, but my family believed in Engai, the god of the Maasai. He can be helpful, at which times we know him as Engai Narok, the Black god. When he is vengeful, he is known as Engai Nanyokie, the Red god.’

Musab nodded and said, ‘You have just described the one god. It is the same.’

‘But how can you reconcile our scientific knowledge with the belief in a creator god. It just doesn’t make any sense?’ Siri argued.

‘You are thinking of the Roman god, Siri, and the worship of their false Christ. Islam has never denied scientific knowledge. While the Holy Roman Empire was destroying libraries and crushing knowledge, it was the true believers that preserved the scientific discoveries that had been passed on via the Persian Empire. There is no conflict between God and science, it is what man has done, is doing, with his discoveries that is of concern to God.’

Siri listened attentively to Musab. He had heard his friend harp on about Islam many times before but this time it was different. There was no hint of light-heartedness, he was being totally earnest and sincere.

‘Are you trying to convert me to Islam?’ Siri asked.

‘Of course, you are my closest friend which is haraam, a sin. I wish you to see the truth and embrace the one true god and save your soul. And, as a believer, our friendship would no longer be haraam and threaten my eternal life. There is a limit to how many sins one man can carry at one time, and I must be seriously pushing my luck with the patients of the almighty.’

‘Look, Musab, I can see that you mean well but, I’m a bit drunk and not thinking very clearly. We’ll talk about it again, soon, I promise.’

Musab nodded, and then he produced his mobile phone, removed the battery and replaced the dismantled instrument back into his pocket.

Holding out his hand, ‘Your phone, please, Siri?’

Enthralled by Musab’s actions, Siri handed over his phone and it was similarly dismantled and returned to him.

‘What are you up to, Musab?’

‘I don’t want us to be overheard, that’s all!’

‘By who?’

You have to remove the battery to prevent the authorities listening through your phone.

Siri smiled and shook his head, ‘No, you’re being paranoid. It can’t be right, and why listen in to us?’

‘Well, let us settle for being sure, just in case, okay?’

Siri nodded, ‘Okay!’ and Musab spoke again, but this time in a hushed and serious manner.

‘What about this trouble with your people? I can make enquiries and, maybe, I can find some advice or even some help’

Siri looked across at Musab and sceptically asked, ‘You think so, really, how?’

‘Tell me,’ Musab began, ‘hypothetically of course. If outsiders were trying to help the Maasai and the authorities started to seek information and co-operation from them, could they be trusted to turn a blind eye to certain, er... strangers and activities in their territory for a while?’

Siri smiled at the thought of his people assisting their government, and proudly replied, ‘The Maasai have no time for the authorities and tell them nothing. Once agreed, the Maasai can be trusted to keep their word, but what are you thinking of?’

‘I cannot give any promises but, if I could help, could you get word to your people to make themselves scarce from any unusual activity in their territory, for a while?’ asked Musab.

‘That wouldn’t be a problem, if it would help.’

‘Are you planning to visit your village again in the near future?’ Musab asked.

‘I wasn’t,’ Siri replied, ‘but I could do, why?’

‘What is it like there in late March and early April?’

With his mind turned toward the Maasai Mara in the spring, Siri sighed and said, ‘It can be wonderful at that time of year with

plenty of grass for the cattle, although drought can happen at any time, you can't rely of the weather on the Maasai Mara, it's a bit like the UK.'

'Apart from the flamingos and elephants!' Musab joked.

'Well, yes, and hippos are also quite unusual in the UK in springtime,' Siri countered.

'Siri, I think Easter might be a good time for another visit, but I can't be sure right now. I'll get back to you on this one but, in the meantime, make some provisional arrangements to return during your Easter break. Not a word to a soul though, not even Hatch.'

Siri realised that Musab was being deadly serious and that he might be getting involved in something dangerous, but he was desperate to help his people, and he readily agreed.

'One condition though,' Musab cautioned. 'If I am successful in my attempts at helping you, I may call in a favour in the future.'

'Anything Musab, you know that.'

'You don't understand. I'm not talking about a small thing. If I were to need your help in the future, it might well be of equal gravity in return.'

Siri was shocked by the unexpected condition attached to Musab's offer of help, but he hesitantly agreed, 'Okay, I understand. I promise.'

It is early June in 2019 and a rough, unmade road runs across the African savannah. The ground to each side of the road is very uneven and almost impassable for vehicles and, a little way off to one side, running roughly parallel to the road, is the depression of a dry river bed.

It is along this road, which is little more than a track-way, upon which three Saudi princes and their hired servants are travelling in three luxury four-by-four vehicles. They are in a convoy which is lead by a military Humvee jeep. A Maasai guide is travelling in a chair mounted on the outside of the lead four-by-four; he is on the lookout for any available game for the Saudis. A portly prince, the elder and most seniors of the expedition, is inside this vehicle and is wearing his flowing white national dress.

Accompanying him are three attentive and scantily dressed young native European women. He is drinking from a cocktail glass and is completely disregarding them, as he is more concerned about the lack of game. The driver is Maasai, as are the drivers of the other two vehicles.

Although the drivers resent these foreigners buying their way into the Maasai Mara, they do pay very well. This income is necessary, as the three Maasai drivers have abandoned their traditional way of life to live in an urban slum, and they have to work long and hard hours in order to pay their taxes and bribes and still be able to provide for their families.

The Saudi prince pulls away from the ministering women as he leans forward in his seat to shout at the driver.

‘Driver!’

‘Yes Sayyd,’ the driver dutifully answers.

‘Where is the game that has been promised? And be more careful, you’re spilling my drink.’

‘Yes Sayyd, sorry Sayyd,’ the driver humbly apologises.

‘And the game man, what of the Game?’ the prince demands, ‘And turn down the air conditioning; you’re giving me a chill.’

‘Yes Sayyd, sorry Sayyd right away Sayyd.’

The Prince is working himself into a tantrum and bellows, ‘Is that all you can damn well say?’

The driver does not know what to say and visibly shrinks a little behind the wheel, as if it might provide some protection against the prince’s anger.

Fortuitously, some game has been spotted by the guide ahead and the driver uses the occasion to deflect the prince’s wrath.

‘Sayyd, Sayyd! To your left.’ he points, ‘Sayyd, I think there are lions’.

‘Where?’ roars the prince as he squints in the direction indicated, and finally sees what could be a pride of lions.

‘That’s more like it!’ he bellows. ‘Let me see! Driver, open the roof!’

The roof panels slide open and the Saudi prince struggles to stand through the aperture. Below, in the vehicle, his hand gestures

impatiently until one of the young women places a pair of binoculars into his hand and, with his upper body protruding through the roof of the vehicle, the prince raises the binoculars to his eyes. He can see the pride of lions relaxing in the shade of an acacia tree. A large group, made up of around eight adults and many more cubs.

A little ahead of the now stationary convoy, lying in wait behind the bank of the dry river bed is a group of six, heavily armed young Islamist fighters. They are almost completely covered by loose fitting, pale coloured clothing. Behind them is their four-wheeled drive pick-up, parked nearby in the depression, well out of sight from the road and covered with camouflaged netting. Three of them are Al-Shabaab Somalis, who are acting under the orders of ISIS. They are armed with two rocket propelled grenades and a sniper rifle. The remaining three are British Muslim volunteers from the city of Manchester, each one armed with an assault rifle and grenades. The convoy has stopped just short of one of the two explosive charges that have been hidden alongside the road at the base of two separate acacia trees. These are to be used to knock out the leading Hummer and block any escape forward, with the second charge in reserve.

Having stopped several feet short of the first tree, it is unlikely that the explosion will destroy the security vehicle which could remain mobile and pose a potential threat to the operation.

‘What the fuck are they doing now?’ says one of the British Islamists.

‘There’re lions’, over to the right, maybe one hundred yards to the right on the other side of the road,’ replies one of his comrades.

‘Right, got yer.’

The commanding Somali angrily retorts in Arabic, ‘Shut up you two and let me think. They have stopped short of the explosives and I have to decide. And speak Arabic, have more respect!’

There is an obvious tension between the Somalis and the Brits, and it is unlikely that any love is lost between the two factions. The first Brit, ignoring the order to speak Arabic, comments,

‘The lead Hummer is almost over the first bomb, let’s do it.’

The Somali dismisses the idea with a wave of his hand.

The roof panels of the three vehicles transporting the hunting party have opened and the three princes can be clearly seen as they emerge. Their personalised hunting rifles with gold and silver inlays sparkle in the sunlight as they are handed up through the open hatches, and they prepare to fire upon the resting family group of lions.

The leading Brit unexpectedly reaches over the shoulder of one of the Somalis and triggers the detonator. The explosion lifts the nose of the leading military vehicle into the air a few feet and it is badly damaged, but it isn't destroyed. A great cloud of dust has been thrown up by the explosion which drifts over the hunting party, briefly obscuring them from the Islamists. Even so, with the road ahead blocked by the crippled Hummer, the four remaining vehicles have to either reverse in single file or leave the track to escape and, in their panic, they collide as they manoeuvre in the dust cloud.

As their vision clears, the drivers accelerate onto the rough ground to pass the smoking road-block. In the confusion, the spotter has leapt from his chair and can be seen in the distance, running directly away from the scene. The hunters are thrown about by the madly cavorting vehicles and have abandoned their valuable rifles in panic as they descend back through the hatches; however, the leading prince's robes have become entangled with his rifle, making it difficult for him to return into the relative safety of his vehicle and he is hit by a single shot. His upper body collapses, bouncing on the roof before it is finally pushed out by the hysterical women inside as the vehicle struggles over the rough ground.

As the three vehicles frantically attempt to escape the ambush, the attackers open fire in earnest and pepper them with semi-automatic rifles. They immediately come to a halt as the three Maasai drivers abandon their charges and pelt away across the savannah, taking the ignition keys with them. Two RPG's are launched and two of the civilian of-roaders are hit, which result in two spectacular explosions. Seeing the destruction, the passengers of the remaining vehicle bale out and, keeping low, they attempt to escape under the cover of the smoke and confusion. But the sniper succeeds in shooting one of them through a break in the smoke, and

the remaining escapees are forced to crawl over the undulating ground.

The surviving crew of the crippled Hummer have recovered from the shock of the initial explosion and the driver's door creaks open and closes again as the driver's body is pushed out. The vehicle slowly begins to move forward in an attempt to escape and a RPG is launched but misses and explodes, well beyond its target. As the vehicle nears the reserve explosive, the lead Brit once again takes the initiative by picking up the discarded remote detonator and giving it to one of the Somalis.

'On my mark,' he orders in Arabic.

Looking through his binoculars, he counts down with the fingers on his raised left hand until the vehicle is at the precise spot, whereupon he completes a clenched fist and the explosives are detonated. The vehicle flips over and is gutted with a fireball.

The remaining escapees have managed to crawl over a hundred yards or more of the rough ground, and regain their feet to run as best they can whilst stooping in an attempt to avoid being shot. However, the sniper kills one more, and the surviving prince and one guest dive back to the ground and continue their escape on their bellies.

There are no signs of movement amid the smoke, dust and remaining twisted wreckage of the convoy, and two of the Brits hi-five each other.

'Fucking brilliant, now lets get the fuck out of here,' says one of them.

The Somali fighters have become uneasy in the company of the Brits. They don't like the way they've usurped their authority and, being new to the game and supposedly fresh out of training in Pakistan; the volunteers from Britain have not behaved as expected and they are far too cocky and confident for the Somali' liking.

The senior Somali says in English, 'It is not, as you say, "*Fucking Brilliant.*" They had plenty of time to report our position and, within minutes, we might be attacked from the air. And, even if we escape them, we could be hunted down by ground forces.'

‘We’d better get going then,’ replies the leading Brit. He turns to leave but the Somali grabs his arm, he hasn’t finished and the tension between them has become explosive.

‘For a believer, death is not a problem; it is a blessing in the service of God. But for you, I wonder if you three are as committed to the service of God.’

The Brit replies, ‘You’re right, for us martyrdom is not so appealing, but I like to see a man fulfil his dreams,’ and with the help of the other two Brits, they calmly and efficiently use their assault rifles to execute the Somalis.

Exchanging a grenade launcher from one of the corpses for one of their rifles, the Brits drag the corpses from the gully onto open ground and carefully rearrange the scene in an attempt to create the appearance of there only having been three attackers. They then recover the camouflaged netting and some provisions from the pick-up, and walk off into the desert away from the wreckage. One of them unfolds the net and, as they walk, they draw it over themselves, ready to drop to the ground at any moment and become a random patch of scrub.

‘I’m bloody sure the orders from the old-man (DFS, the UK’s Director of Special Forces.) were to kill the bastards *before* the attack Sarge; not help them take out the Saudis.’

‘Well, we tried, but it turned out to be impossible to prevent the attack. Anyway Peters, don’t you like lions?’

‘Yes Sarge, but I doubt that David Attenborough would approve.’

They gradually disappear through the haze of the desert heat under the broken shade of the camouflage net.

In the opposite direction, the reprieved lions had moved several hundred yards away from the disturbance to settle down, once more, in the broken shade of an acacia tree. As they gazed at the distant burning wreckage and the rising smoke, the movements of the two escapees are noticed by the four lionesses and, as the suckling cubs are scattered and seek entertainment from pestering the males, their mothers slowly pad in the direction of their next meal.

There was a brief mention of the incident across the media, described as a terrorist attack. The protestations of the wealthy Sunni Arab nations were generally dismissed by the ordinary citizens in the west, although their politicians, ever mindful of potential arms sales and oil supplies from the Middle East, made a competitive show of condemnation of the terrorists at various media interviews. Siri knew that his conversation with Musab was connected to the incident but, as agreed, the subject was never mentioned.

The attack was extremely harmful to future sales of hunting rights on Maasai land in Tanzania and, after the attack, the authorities persisted in haranguing the Maasai for information. They couldn't accept that the people knew nothing of who was responsible and, if they proved to be unable to produce the culprits and provide guaranteed security for the shooting syndicates in the future, the lucrative sale of hunting rights to the Middle East could be lost indefinitely. That would mean the consequent loss of millions of dollars for the treasury, and a significant financial lost to those concerned with the deal. The authorities couldn't understand why the Maasai were obviously taking sides with outsiders, terrorists. Like many governments before them in their complacency, they seemed to be incapable of understanding that oppressed people will accept help from any source, and be grateful.

Chapter X

LILOE & UNICA

As arranged, Siri had returned to his village during the Easter break and was delighted to find that Liloë was pregnant with his child although, in the eyes of his people, the child would belong to his dead father, Olamayiani. Lankenuna was well aware of the truth but seemed to have forgiven them, and she made every effort to make Siri welcome. Liloë had told him that as soon as his mother had realised they were expecting a child, she had been busy weaving new blankets to keep Liloë and the baby warm during the cold nights in September, when the baby was due.

His uncle Mrjooli had assumed leadership in place of Olamayiani, although he and his brother Tonkei were jointly managing the community. Siri explained to them that it would be helpful to the Maasai if, for the time being, they failed to notice the presence of any small groups of armed strangers in their territory, with the exception of poachers. Siri also borrowed Mabel's ancient Land Rover, and he and Tonkei toured around the nearby villages to pass the same message among the adjoining Maasai villages. It was important to avoid using mobiles or the internet due to the monitoring of all electrical communications that was undoubtedly taking place.

Having accomplished his main task, Siri spent his remaining time with his family and friends. Mabel was delighted to see him again and kept him talking for hours about his studies and life in Oxford. Whenever he mentioned a place that she was familiar with, she would stop him and reminisce, and Siri became aware that Mabel had made a considerable sacrifice in order to help his village.

When not with Mabel or his uncles, Siri's remaining time in the village was mostly spent with his mother and Liloë. Each night, not knowing when they might be together again, Siri and Liloë clung to one-another with an emotional intensity that neither had previously experienced during their relatively young lives.

Shortly after returning to Oxford, Siri was accosted in the street by an unknown and angry young woman who asked if he was proud of himself. When she realised that he had no idea of what she was talking about, she related to him how her gay friend, the boy that Siri had verbally abused, had brooded over his sexuality for months following the incident in the restaurant. His unhappiness and confusion had finally led to him leaping into the river Cherwell from the Magdalen Bridge on Mayday morning in some sort of effort to prove something, which was beyond her understanding but, regardless, she blamed Siri for it.

Siri recognised her, although the girl looked very different in daylight and without an alcoholic haze between them. He asked after the boy's condition and was told that he had been dragged out by the rescue services after sustaining a multiple broken leg, and he was now recovering in hospital with his leg in traction. Siri had long regretted the incident in the restaurant and had thought it behind him but, after hearing this news, he felt wretched and asked which hospital, but she wouldn't tell him.

She explained that he would be the very last person that her friend would want to see, but it was evident; however, that Siri was genuinely repentant and she reassured him that the boy was expected to make a full recovery.

Siri, foolishly, acted on impulse.

'I know we've got off to as bad a start as can be imagined but we're next to a coffee shop, would you like to have a coffee with me?'

She looked sideways at him and replied. 'Don't get me wrong but, under the circumstances, I don't think that would be a very good idea. You know, one thing leads to another.'

Siri laughed. 'Well, that *was* the idea.'

She was not amused, 'Yes, I realise that, but David wouldn't like it and he's my best friend. And... boyfriends come and go, but best friends tend to stick around a bit longer, if you know what I mean?'

'David?' Siri asked.

'The boy you called a bent bastard,' she answered.

‘Oh,’ said Siri, once again feeling awkward.

Now that the boy had been given a name it made him feel even guiltier and they parted, if not as friends at least not as mortal enemies.

She had only taken a few steps when she turned and called back to him.

‘Look, if you really feel bad about David, my name is Noia... Noia Calenta. You can pop a token for David in my pigeon hole, if you like, at Oxford Martin School and I will forward it on to him.’

Siri suppressed a smile as he replied, ‘Yes, thanks I will do that, Noia.’

She turned again and continued walking.

As he watched her disappear amongst a crowd of tourists, he found himself running through the frosty encounter and, comparing her cold pale skin and awkward movements to Liloë’s warm glow and supple movements, he felt a stab of homesickness.

A few weeks later, both Hatch and Musab had completed their time in Oxford and disappeared from Siri’s life. Hatch moved on to the US Naval Academy, and Musab had left without leaving any contact information, even his social network pages had been shut down. Siri still had many friends and acquaintances but Hatch and Musab had become like brothers, they had become his family and, without their support and friendship, he felt very alone. Hatch kept in touch for a while via the internet, but their exchanges gradually reduced to sporadic messages on occasions such as Christmas and the fourth of July when Siri would tease Hatch about celebrating tax evasion and the right to keep slaves. Nothing was heard of Musab.

Siri dedicated himself to his studies at Oxford and became a Doctor of Science at the age of twenty-one but, whenever possible, he had visited his home in Tanzania. Liloë would have preferred him to have lived in the village on a permanent basis but she understood the need for him to return to the UK, and she made no complaint. In return, he readily accepted responsibility for the little sister that his son had acquired from one of Liloë’s special friends.

Siri became a fellow at his old university, and gave lectures in biology for several years until he was head-hunted by Monsanto, a

US corporation that had previously developed, among other products, DDT, Agent Orange and PCB's. They were possibly better known for the controversy surrounding their biological patents of genetically modified crops and glyphosate. This type of research wouldn't have normally interested Siri but Monsanto were willing to pay for the very best biologists and geneticists they could secure and, although Siri was reluctant to move to the US, the salary was indecently large which meant that he could regularly forward a generous allowance to his family in Tanzania.

The civilian disquiet in the UK, and the government's use of military personnel to control the rioting, was beginning to make living in the UK unpleasant. Siri asked Gloria to accompany him and live in the US, but she was unwilling to leave her family and friends and had insisted that he make the most of the opportunity for himself.

The work involved the continuing practice of developing and patenting new crops. These were promoted to replace the traditional varieties which could be replanted from year to year, freely and without the annual cost of a licence.

For Siri, life had fallen into a rhythm. He worked long hours and occasionally dated women, but nothing serious was allowed to develop. He spent long vacations in Tanzania with Liloë who only had the first and second born, as two later arrivals had died, nameless, within weeks of their birth.

Their first born Lemayian, was named after his grandfather, partly in honour of Olamayiani, but also because he was conceived soon after the time of his grandfather's death. Although Siri was a sceptic of superstitious beliefs, he often wondered if the spirit of his father had returned within his son, he was five years old now and as tough as an old ironwood tree. His younger sister, Namelok, was a pretty little thing as she had her mother's good looks. Siri's life may have continued unchanged for some time, if it were not for a particularly brilliant and beautiful young assistant who joined his team.

Unica Ätbara was a couple of years junior to Siri, she was a twenty-two year old, tall, slim blonde with blue eyes who, like Siri,

had also been head-hunted for the company through the U.S. H-1B programme, sometimes referred to as 'The Genius Visa.' Officially, anyone qualifying was classified as an 'Alien of extraordinary ability' and, throughout its history, the US had relied on using its wealth to finance the resourcing of talented people from overseas to maintain its development.

Unica had been working in Sweden, although she was an Italian national, and Monsanto had high hopes of her engagement increasing Siri's department's production and profitability.

From their first meeting, Siri and Unica felt a mutual attraction for each other and, within a few days, they both knew instinctively that a serious relationship was developing between them. Unica also knew that her parents, who were separated, would be furious if she took a black African for her lover. Her father was Swedish and a member of the Folkfronten, which translates as People's Front, a Swedish neo-nazi political party. Her mother was Italian and lived in a town called Sterzing in North Italy near the Austrian border. Unica's family was not the most open minded group of people when it came to tolerating non-Arian whites. Her mother's family was so extremely pro German, that they barely acknowledged their home town, Sterzing, as being part of Italy. They spoke only German at home, using Italian only when necessary, and were ashamed and embarrassed at being associated with Italians, in particular those from Southern Italy.

Unica's maternal great grandparents had played a key role in assisting several leading Nazis in their escape from Germany to Argentina in the last days of the Second World War, and their right wing political views had seemingly been passed on through the succeeding generations with the exception of Unica.

Unica was different. Her attitudes had, naturally, been deeply influenced by the cold, disciplinary upbringing from her parents, which had been reinforced by being sent away, at the age of seven, to a Catholic boarding school in Munich. But Unica was exceptionally intelligent, and her natural empathetic abilities had survived her extreme right-wing upbringing and primary education.

Later, she studied natural sciences, at ETH Zurich - the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, where she had gone on to develop an independent understanding of the world based on her own observations and common sense. Even so, she was reluctant to get emotionally involved with Siri and risk the complications that it would entail, should the relationship become permanent.

Siri and Unica began to socialise out of working hours. Initially it was simply grabbing a coffee together after work. Later, they dined at an Italian restaurant, and it was only after they had spent their first night together that Siri explained to her his relationship with Lilo.

Unica's reaction was not what he had hoped for. She was furious, and berated him and said that she felt used and betrayed and, 'Might have known that a damn black man would have a string of women to service, just a stupid jungle boy with a hard cock,' and much more. Of course, in her heart, she did not mean any of it, but Siri had hurt her. He had deceived her into falling in love, and she wanted to hurt him as much as possible.

After storming out of his apartment, she immediately felt confused and ashamed of her outburst. She couldn't understand what was happening to her emotions, and her subsiding anger left her feeling weak and wretched. After all, she reasoned, she had a romantic past, she was no virgin. Her heart wanted to return and make it right again, but her head was in the past which had forged her ego and her pride into a stubborn axis. Lifting her tear streaked chin, she marched on, and there would be no going back.

Siri knew that he should have told her about Lilo before they had sex, but his Maasai upbringing had made seducing Unica, with little thought of her feelings, all too easy and natural. It wasn't until she had finished the relationship that he realised how wrong the situation must have seemed from her viewpoint, and he hurt inside.

He experienced a great feeling of loss, completely out of scale with simply being deprived of the pleasures of a particular woman. Her words had shaken his self confidence and, for the first time in his adult life, he felt shame and saw himself through her eyes, as a primitive, selfish black man.

Following his confession, their relationship became strictly professional and he found the following weeks in one another's company, almost unbearable. Many times he had tried, and failed, to apologise in an attempt to find a way to repair the damage. He became obsessed by jealousy and frequently tortured himself with the thought of her seeing someone else, often visualising her having sex with another man.

As the weeks turned into months, the quality of his work declined and he was close to quitting his job until, late one evening as he was about to retire, he had an unexpected visitor.

When he looked at the monitor he could see Unica, swaying slightly at his door, and it was obvious that she was a little intoxicated. Siri wasn't the only one to be tortured by the separation, and loneliness, hormones and alcohol had finally overcome Unica's resolution to stay away. She had returned to claim what was rightfully hers.

He raced to the entrance of his apartment but paused, for a moment, before nonchalantly opening the door. Without even looking at his face, she pushed past him talking continually.

She declared, 'So, you have an unofficial wife in Africa, fine, but you are going to have to have an official one in the US, if you want me to be your woman.'

Siri knew that he should have waited for her to sober up before taking advantage of the situation, but he remembered her cruel words and thought, 'Fuck western sensitivities, this stupid jungle boy is giving this white girl his hard cock before she changes her mind.' He need not have worried, she was not about to give him up again.

After that night, Siri and Unica shared his apartment. Although he and Liloé were not officially married, he observed the formality of asking her to choose Unica for his second wife. She did so, telling him that it was good that he had a second wife with him in the US, Unica would be able to keep an eye on him and keep him out of mischief. Unica was still uncomfortable about Siri's *other life* as she called it, until she received a handwritten letter from Liloé.

When she saw who it was from she was surprised, her preconceptions somehow hadn't allowed for the idea of a tribal, sub Saharan African woman writing a letter in English that was easily as competent as her own. She knew nothing of Mabel's rigorous and dedicated efforts with the Maasai children.

It read:

Dear Unica,

I was so happy when Siri told me that he had found you and wanted you to be his second wife, although you will be his first wife under US law, as we are not actually married.

This was not possible as I was the third wife of Siri's father, who was very old at the time of the marriage and died six years ago. Nevertheless, I cannot remarry.

In spite of this, for the last six years, Siri has always extended every courtesy due to a wife in the Maasai tradition and, accordingly, he has asked me to choose you for his second wife, as is our custom.

I fell in love with Siri when I was fourteen years old and fate has been kind to me in allowing us to share some time together and for him to be the father of my first child.

I have worried about him being away from his home, alone amongst all the dangers we hear about in western cities and, now that you and he are together, I can stop worrying, knowing that someone who loves him will be taking care of him.

I hope we will meet one day but, in the mean time, I send my warmest wishes in welcoming you into our family.

Yours sincerely

Liloe

Siri had explained that he was effectively the father of all Liloe's children, regardless of whom the biological father had been which had offended her morality. But after reading Liloe's letter, Unica's feelings were confused. It seemed as if her understanding of morality had been turned upside-down. She had always assumed that society in western democracies were far superior to any primitive,

native African culture. But now, as she considered the uncaring serial polygamy practised in the west, often after having produced unwanted children, it all seemed crude and barbaric in comparison with the selflessness revealed in Liloé's letter.

Siri and Unica married, in spite of her misgivings, and her family immediately disowned her. Unica made no attempt to interfere with Siri's visits to Tanzania, even though she knew that when he wasn't away from his village, making representations to the Tanzanian authorities on behalf of his people, he would be spending the nights in the arms of Liloé. She reluctantly accepted that the existence of Liloé and her children in Siri's life was part of their marriage contract; however, each time he returned from a trip to Tanzania she insisted that he underwent a full health check before she would allow any physical intimacies to occur.

A year after the marriage, Unica gave birth to a girl, Marabilla, and when she was two years old, she and Unica accompanied Siri to his village. This was Unica's first visit to Siri's African home, and she discovered for herself that their extended family was no threat, but rather an additional source of strength and security. She was welcomed and loved by Siri's mother, Liloé and the villagers, who were fascinated by her translucent, almost transparent complexion. The very last emotions she had expected to experience were the warmth and belonging she felt from being a member of a loving family.

Over the course of several visits, Unica and Liloé became close friends, and Lankenuna and Liloé spent many hours teaching Unica the skills of a Maasai woman. Pounding maize corn was the most strenuous of these activities but, once Unica's back had toughened up a little, she enjoyed working with Liloé at the rhythmic lifting and pounding in turn of her timber pestle into a large wooden mortar of corn. During these family reunions, Siri's children played together under the watchful eye of their mothers, as he spent much of his time visiting the various governmental departments in the continued battle to prevent the remaining free Maasai from being forcibly expelled from their land.

This unusual arrangement continued up to the time when Siri's world was thrown into chaos by the untimely deaths of both Unica and his daughter who was just short of her tenth birthday. This tragedy was shortly followed by his mother's death from a fever. Heartbroken, Siri was unable to continue with his work and he spent a long sabbatical in his village before finally resigning from his position with Monsanto, not even returning to the US to collect any of his belongings from his home.

For many years he had been disillusioned with his work, but he had soldiered on for the sake of the financial security it provided his extended family. The generous salary had also enabled him to provide financial help for Mabel in the purchasing of technology, books and stationery for the school. Following the death of his wife and child and mother, and after much thought and meditation on what was to be done, he transferred his assets to Liloë to ensure that his remaining family would not suffer as a consequence of him having abandoned his lucrative employment. After several months with Liloë, he returned to the US to manage his affairs and to apply for a position in the natural sciences concerned with combating and the adaptation to climate change

It had been obvious, throughout Siri's career, that the international business community had no thoughts of making any contribution towards averting the ensuing environmental disaster, brought about by global warming and the consequential climate changes that were building in momentum. Their only consideration, throughout, had appeared to be the capitalisation of the sequence of events that Siri expected would bring about the deaths of billions of people.

One of Ralph's mantras came into Siri's mind.

'Wielding the flaming sword of truth will make you invincible. But one mistake, one lie, one deception on your part, will bring the blade about to strike you down.'

The bitter irony of Ralph's warning struck Siri like a hammer blow. Had his selfishness brought about the deaths of his wife and beloved daughter? Siri decided to switch his skills from the

exploitation of climate change to dedicating his efforts towards minimising, as much as possible at this late stage, the expected catastrophic effects on humanity and the environment on which it depended for survival. Tens of millions of people had already died from the impact of climate change, and the rate was expected to reach at least one-hundred million within the following five years.

Even during his time at Oxford University, it was common knowledge that much of the funding for research was provided by powerful corporations, eager to develop new systems and products that would be in demand in the changing environment. At that time, Siri had tried to repeat Ralph's concerns regarding the expanding population and the need to reverse growth as a priority. At first his logic had been politely dismissed and, when he had persisted, he had detected an irritation and unwillingness to listen by the professors concerned.

Ralph had not been at all surprised and he had instructed Siri to concentrate on his work and outwardly agree with his superiors; they were being paid to educate him, not the other way round.

During Siri's term of employment with Monsanto in biotech science, the effects of climate change had continued to worsen and become ever more disastrous for the poorer economies of the world, and there seemed to be no sign of any change in government policy. But a dramatic change of heart amongst the higher echelons of power was beginning to take place.

Serious attempt at combating the aging process and prolonging human life had been underway in laboratories for many years and, although some progress had been made, no silver bullet had been produced; until now.

A biotech corporation had succeeded in combining two revolutionary procedures. One of these reduced the cellular damage that occurs naturally during the aging process, and the other improved and extended the performance of the genetic repair system. These procedures also had the added effects of some tissue rejuvenation and the eradication of many of the ailments associated with aging. Although these life prolonging therapies were effective and available, they were still undergoing further development and,

within a decade or so, they were expected to be able to double life expectancy. This alone seemed almost incredible but, within the foreseeable future, the addition of DNA Nanorobots could theoretically prolong life indefinitely.

Some vastly expensive procedures to prolong life, by around fifty percent, had been available to those who could afford them for some time and, although some attempts had been made to play down their effectiveness, the general public were increasingly making demands upon their government to make these therapies generally available and affordable. However, as the high level of human population was already unsustainable and continued to increase, the prospect of significantly extending the lifespan of large numbers of humanity was both unthinkable and irresistible. Unthinkable for reasons already outlined, irresistible from the point of view of the patent-holders and the ensuing supply-chain and outlets providing the treatments.

The significant politicians were duly lobbied on behalf of the interested corporations and won over by the moral argument, and the occasional directorship, and it was not until the full implications of making the therapies universally available were digested and understood by the elite, that a complete u-turn was instigated.

A public announcement was made which claimed that, although the treatments had been partially successful, many patients had suffered from disfigurements and, in some cases, fatal side effects. Some disturbing images and reported horrific deaths of well known elderly celebrities were released, attributed to life prolonging therapies, and the public clamour for anti-age treatments subsided.

Both the motives for withdrawing the treatments, and the publicised effects were untrue. Initially, there had been problems involving the immune system, but a combination of therapies had indeed been developed which was expected to deliver a genuine fountain of youth within the foreseeable future. The frightening reality, which had dawned upon the international gnostic elite, was that if they were to be exceptionally long-lived or, possibly, even immortal, the preservation of a pleasant and habitual environment on Earth was of crucial importance. They had no intention of inhabiting

a poisonous wasteland, and there would be little pleasure living on a dead planet even if it was possible to sustain artificially protected living quarters.

Up to this time the prevailing attitude of proceeding generations towards climate change, at all levels of society, had been one of hopelessness which had generally been rationalised with sentiments along the lines of. ‘It won’t happen in my lifetime,’ and, ‘I just realised, it’s not my problem as I don’t have any kids!’ But, with immortality staring the economic aristocracy, the elite, in the face, the decision makers began to contemplate the horror of being alive at the end of the world.

Chapter XI

THE BLESSINGS OF SHIVA - 2050

Fifteen years after Unica's death, in the early morning of an autumn's day in two thousand and fifty, Siri was making his way to work at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the US, where he lectured in environmental biotechnology. He rarely visited his home in Tanzania and, when he did, his time was mostly taken up with local officials, spending little time with his family.

At fifty years of age, Siri had white hairs running through the hair on his head, and through his beard. He was a leading member of a research team who were nearing the completion of a classified, internationally funded project. Answerable to the United Nations, his team would soon be in a position to submit a highly detailed strategy for the survival of humanity with the code name, 'The Blessings of Shiva', abbreviated to TBOS. There had been minor leaks regarding the research, and the press had given it the name of 'The Doomsday Plan'.

Because of the understandable mistrust of the authorities by the general population, this unwanted publicity had led an increase in anti-government demonstrations, in particular, against the secrecy surrounding the UN's activities in the fight against climate change. Although the detention camps were filled to capacity, and many more were under construction, this particular morning saw a particularly large demonstration in progress along Quincy Street, which was blocking Siri's route to the main entrance of the university. The protesters were of all ages and background and their placards had many different messages including: STOP THE UN CONSPIRACY, FOOD FOR ALL and EVERYONE NEEDS A HOME.

The militarised police from Homeland Security were in attendance but, for the time being, they were not breaking up the crowd which ambled along the road as they shouted out their slogans. Siri grew impatient and decided to cross through the packed crowd, rather than wait until it had passed.

Initially, he could weave and dodge through the precession but, as he neared the centre column, he had to resort to forcing his way between the tightly packed demonstrators. He had very nearly made it to the safety of the cordon at his destination, when a banner waver grabbed his arm. He pulled Siri around and shouted into his face, 'What's with you, buddy? Don't you care about us little people?'

Siri gave no reply. He was sympathetic and could have debated with the guy, but he couldn't spare the time. Also, he realised that any argument that wasn't appeasing to a mob would simply provoke anger and, possibly, aggression. With an easy twist of his arm, he broke away from the protestors grip, was allowed to pass through the cordon, and hurried on.

Earlier that morning, in the pre-dawn darkness, Siri's senior, Jim Salvadore, was groaning and thrashing about in his sleep. A bedside light was switched on to reveal an expensively furnished bedroom. Lucy, Jim's wife, turned from the lamp to attend to her sleeping husband who was in the grips of a nightmare, and she gently shook him.

'Jim,' she softly called out.

He lay still and opened his eyes. Confused and unsure of where he was, he turned and focused his vision upon Lucy's worried face. Then, suddenly clinging to her, he buried his face into her breast as she wrapped her arms around him; a tortured man, rescued once more by his loving wife from the living horrors that inhabited his mind every hour of every day and every night.

The days could be managed through his dedication to work, but the nights were different. Nothing, including the use of drugs could prevent the manifestations of his fears reforming in his sleep. Each night they would wreak an onslaught on his defenceless mind from the darkness of his guilt-ridden subconscious. The stress and responsibility imposed upon Jim by his work had deprived him of his libido, thereby denying him even the temporary distraction of love making.

'Aw Hon,' Lucy sighed with tenderness as he sobbed into her nightdress.

Jim arrived at work shortly after Siri and, as he walked into his department looking haunted and ill, Siri walked up to him bearing two mugs of strong coffee.

Taking one with a nod of appreciation, Jim said, 'Thanks Siri, you must be a clairvoyant.'

Siri looked into Jim's sunken eyes and commented, 'You look pretty beat up Jim, still having trouble sleeping?'

'Yeah, worse than ever!'

'Me too,' Siri confided. Then he announced, 'We have the final draft for TBOS, the last computations came through over night.'

'As we feared?' Jim asked.

'Oh yes. It doesn't leave us any options, otherwise, well, you know better than I do what we're facing.'

'It merely confirms what has been known for over half a century through the use of our innate common sense?'

'That's about right,' Siri answered.

They wandered across the office and sat at a transparent desk. Siri touched in his sequenced fingerprints on the glass top and the final computations and likely projections of TBOS sprang into view in mid-air on a laser screen. After a few moments of scrolling through the figures, the two friends turned away to face one another and tried to relax enough to enjoy their coffee.

Jim commented on the projects code name.

'Who ever thought of that title must have been some sort of tree-hugger.'

'Yes, one with a degree in theology maybe?' replied Siri.

'Maybe theology is the only thing left. After all it's science that got us into this mess in the first place,' Jim observed. He then recited one of Siri's favourite quotations from Bertrand Russell, in a really bad English accent.

'There are three ways of securing a society that shall be stable as regards population. The first is that of birth control, the second that of infanticide or really destructive wars, and the third that of general misery except for a powerful minority.'

'Do you think he will be proven right? Siri asked with concern.

‘I hope not, because that only leaves infanticide,’ Jim replied.

‘If enacted, TBOS is supposed to save humanity not partially eradicate it!’

Jim rubbed his temples with both hands; he was developing another headache.

Siri could see that his superior and friend was unwell and to continue a cross examination was unfair but, he couldn’t resist asking, ‘Do you *really* think it has a chance of working, Jim?’

Jim turned and looked Siri square in the face as he replied, ‘Let’s hope so. Then again, maybe, it’s just time to pray.’

Jim noticed how his friend was also looking tired and care worn, and his own mood wasn’t helping. He made a valiant effort to lighten up.

‘There’s just no point in beating ourselves up about it, leave that to the politicians. We just have to make the best of what’s been dealt to us, and this coffee is better than it usually is!’

But, being far from optimistic, Jim couldn’t help but add, ‘I don’t know what to say to my wife and kids. Nothing at all might be best for now.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t think, you have your own family to worry about.’

‘Not really,’ replied Siri. ‘Not because of TBOS at any rate,’ said Siri. ‘My adopted mother in England died some time ago and I have no-one else to worry about in the West and, if anything, my family in Tanzania will benefit from the protection provided by TBOS to indigenous peoples, if it’s adopted.’

Jim was a little put out by Siri’s attitude and retorted, ‘Well, it seems like you have nothing to worry about then,’ and Siri laughed at Jim’s jealousy.

‘You don’t understand,’ Siri began to explain. ‘It’s not that I have nothing to worry about, it’s simply that I have no additional worries. Life on the Maasai Mara is precarious at best, and life expectancy is far shorter than in the West. Unless you’re born and bred there your chances of survival are virtually nil, and even the indigenous can die of disease or be killed at any time by any number of eventualities,’ and Siri laughed again at Jim’s misunderstanding.

‘But don’t get me wrong,’ he added,’ one day in the Mara and you are more alive than a month in domestication. There’s no need to feel any pity or be sympathetic for the Maasai; they truly live to the full and in the moment!’

‘Sorry,’ said Jim, ‘I wasn’t thinking. Sorry for being such a dick!’

Siri knew perfectly well that Jim had friends in the right places and, as he reached out and gave Jim’s shoulder a squeeze, he noticed Jim’s Masonic tie pin.

‘Yeah, stop being a dick, your family will be OK. Whatever happens, they will be with you on the inside. Remember?’

The exchange seemed to break the spell and they both snapped out of their gloom. Or, maybe, it was the coffee beginning to take effect, and Siri returned to the business at hand.

‘We should submit the report as soon as possible. Today if we can, delay can only make things worse.’

‘The world can wait one more day,’ said Jim, ‘we should carefully go over it together first and double check and, maybe, tomorrow. Are you good for an overnighter?’

‘Sure, of course,’ Siri replied.

‘Good,’ said Jim. ‘Let’s get the team together and make a start on it then.’

‘This will mean the end of Western democracy, any democracy,’ observed Siri.

‘Western democracy is like ice-cream, it simply provides a variety of flavours but it’s all bad for you, and too much of it makes you fat and lazy and gives you a heart condition,’ said Jim. ‘It’s how we ended up here.’

‘You made that up. How long have you been waiting to slip that one out into a conversation?’ Siri quipped.

‘So? See if you can do any better,’ said Jim.

‘Democracy is a device that insures we shall be governed no better than we deserve,’ suggested Siri.

‘Very good,’ said Jim. ‘But you’re a cheat! When, exactly, did Bertrand Russell write that one?’ accused Jim.

‘George Bernard Shaw, actually!’

‘You can be such an English snob sometimes, Siri!’

It took longer than they expected to thoroughly examine TBOS for errors before the finalised report could be presented to the projects executive committee. The members were made up of a selection of leading international scientists, and a further delay was incurred as they were given time to read through the proposals before attending an assembly to confer their approval, which took place at the Pentagon. The austere committee room was laid out with rows of simple chairs, occupied by around fifty sombre looking men and women. The Chair, a Doctor Lise Meitner, was a stout, middle-aged woman who was standing on a raised platform at the head of the room behind a lectern. She spoke in English, but with a heavy German accent.

‘Well,’ she began, ‘assuming that we all have received and studied our copies of the TBOS report, euphemistically entitled,’ she frowned and wrinkled her nose with distaste as she spoke the name, ‘The Blessings Of Shiva, although I wouldn’t count on too many blessings emerging from it, we can proceed with the process of recommending it to our superiors.’

She paused for a moment and the fidgeting and murmur of voices gradually diminished until the room was in silence.

‘You each have had a copy for several days now and there have been no surprises, simply the confirmation of what we already knew.

‘I assume that we are all in agreement on the concluding recommendations?’ She scanned the faces of the assembled committee members, looking for any signs of dissent.

‘I sincerely hope we have consensus on this matter with no objections as it is imperative for success that the recommendations are put into practice in entirety.’ She waited, looking for a raised hand and there was none.

‘Very well, do we have a proposer for the motion for the said recommendations to be submitted by this assembly as an advisory document in the process of compiling a directive of the Emergency Action Department of the United Nations, which, if you can believe it, abbreviates as DEADUN.’

One or two members of the assembly gave a grim chuckle as she wearily removed her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She then looked up and continued to address the audience. ‘I think it would be wise to ensure it is changed to the Emergency Action Department of the United Nations Directive, making the acronym, EADUND, or better still, The EADUN Directive.

There was a murmur of approval from some of the audience.

‘Now, where were we? Yes! Do we have a proposer?’

Jim stood and raised his hand and the Chairwoman acknowledged him.

‘The chair recognizes Professor James Salvadore. Yes Professor, do you wish to propose the motion?’

‘As I am the leading author it seems only right that I should take on the responsibility of proposing the motion to forward this report. Yes, I propose the motion.’

The Chairwoman nodded in agreement and continued, ‘Very well, do we have a second?’

Siri, hesitantly, stood and the Chairwoman acknowledged him.

‘Professor Sironka Masters, you wish to second the motion?’

‘Yes, I second the motion,’ Siri reluctantly confirmed.

The Chairwoman thanked Siri and addressed the assembly.

‘All those in favour?’

Virtually all those present raised their hands, some more readily than others.

‘Against?’

None were raised.

‘Abstained?’

A few scattered hands sprang up.

As the chair collected her notebook together she announced, ‘The motion is proposed, seconded and overwhelmingly supported by the committee. Is there any other business? I sincerely hope not! No? Good!

‘The proposal will be forwarded to the UN immediately. Ladies and Gentlemen, that concludes our business at this time, have a good day.’

Within a few weeks another assembly was occupying a larger, more elaborate committee room in the Pentagon. This time it wasn't a collection of highly trained and informed leaders in their specialist field of sciences, it was a summit of the most influential international political and corporate leaders, many of whom struggled to understand the most basic principles of any science. The one subject; however, they all had considerable expertise in, was determining on which side their bread was buttered, and the conflict between, profit and self-preservation, set against, the retention of some sort of credibility, was to be tested to near breaking point before an agreement would be reached and the meeting finalised.

The walls behind the platform were heavily draped with the North American Flag and, in spite of the growing social and financial difficulties experienced by the US, no-one could mistake who was in control, and the security surrounding the assembly was maintained at the maximum level. The president of the US at that time was Gideon Gripp-Thorn and he was officiating at the summit meeting. He looked to one side of the hall to where the officer in command of the military guards was standing.

'Colonel, if you would be so good as to direct your men outside please.'

This request seemed to take to Colonel by surprise, but he promptly ordered his men to leave although he remained in the room.

The President once more addressed the Colonel.

'And yourself Colonel, if you would be so good?'

For a moment the Colonel looked alarmed as his eyes flickered across the international assembly but, after the briefest hesitation, he saluted and left, closing the door behind him.

The President addressed those present.

'Fellow delegates, we have all become very familiar with the global situation and the necessary action to be taken, as proscribed in the document that lay in front of you. As you are all aware, it is proposed that this document, the blessings of Shiva, or TBOS, should be the basis of a global directive to be enacted by EADUN and referred to as the EADUN Directive, which is to be ratified at this meeting.'

‘Delegates, in the Book of Revelation, the bible speak of the Four Horsemen bringing about a Divine Apocalypse. These are named as Conquest, War, Famine, and Death. In reality, it seems more likely that these riders have been active throughout the Anthropocene and could be better referred to as, Industry, Consumption, Population, and Pollution; we are drowning under the excrement of human ingenuity.

‘It is a sobering fact that, regardless of any decisions we make today, we may be facing not only the end of the civilizations that we have for so long taken for granted but, also, the end of much of life on Earth including most, if not all, of mankind.’

The audience were mesmerised by the speaker, and the room became filled with a dark pool of concentration.

‘Having reached a consensus during the last ten days, as I see it, the only thing for us to determine at this time is ‘when’. Does anyone have anything relevant to add?’

The room was filled with the excited attempts by most of the delegates to be noticed by the chair, with the notable exception of those from the US, Russia and China, and the president had to pound on his lectern to restore order.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, gentlemen, please? Let us have order. If any delegate has anything constructive to add please let them raise their hand and the assembly will give them its fullest attention.’

The delegates settled down and no hands were raised.

The President waited for a few moments for complete silence before he continued.

‘As we are all aware, many attempts have been made over recent decades to reduce the impact of humanity on the environment and reverse global warming and the consequential climate changes. These measures have very likely slowed the process but they have not been sufficient to arrest, let alone reverse, the warming trend with all of the attendant, unavoidable disastrous consequences.

‘We have, therefore, been forced to consider taking the most severe action that is required in order to save our world, rather than continue to act ineffectually under the restraint of short term disadvantages. Because of our unwillingness to tackle the causes of

climate change in the past, the time has arrived when we are forced to bite the bullet, hard, in order to endure the cure!

‘To summarize; according to recommendations in TBOS, the following actions will be taken:’

He paused for a moment as he took in the gravity of what he was about to say.

‘Firstly, the immediate isolation and defence of the remaining zero net carbon emitting self supporting indigenous peoples and their territories. If, for any reason, the climatic situation becomes critical for the survival of humanity, it is these communities that will be the best hope for a continuing future for mankind. Having established these protected reserves, an additional commitment of resources will be employed to expand these territories with reforestation etcetera, whilst maintaining a balance of fauna and flora and, in so doing, provide a greater take-up of carbon dioxide. These communities will be totally self-sufficient and, apart from being protected from any encroachment from any unauthorised population. They will not be interfered with by the regional authorities.

‘Secondly, to secure and defend a substantial area of our most productive remaining agricultural land, where low-tech communities can live and work to produce sustainable food surpluses and accommodate the maximum number of the most suitable members of our existing population. These communities will be largely self-sufficient and will be living, what was once referred to as, *the good life*, although they will be subjected to eugenics and population control in order to maintain a healthy stock. Again, it is of the essence that these communities are, on balance and at the most, zero net carbon emitters. It is hoped that eventually the vast majority of food production for the remaining urban population will be sourced from these sustainable farming communities.

‘Thirdly, the remaining areas of good to poorer agricultural land will be initially used to produce the extra food required, by employing efficient, low carbon, high tech farming methods. This land will be linked to a network of new, near zero carbon emission cities to be built around the globe to house the remaining population

that are dependent upon technology. Incidentally, the construction of these cities will be largely constructed from materials, plastics essentially, synthesised using waste and atmospheric carbon dioxide.

‘The health and appropriate reproduction of the city population will be strictly maintained and improved to produce an elite who will further mankind’s knowledge and understanding of the universe, and ensure that humanity is in the best possible position to counter future threats to its survival.’

There was a general murmuring among the assembly as various delegation members exchange opinions with one another. The President gave them a few moments to settle down before he continued.

‘Initially, sufficient new cities will be created to house governments, the civil service, the military, economic institutions, the scientific community, vital industries and carefully chosen citizens to provide the necessary personnel to complete a balanced population in each city. In fact, a considerable number of these developments have been under way for some time in anticipation of this directive, and many are nearing completion.’

This was the confirmation of one of the worst kept secrets in history, and surprised no-one.

‘In order to comply with the TBOS report, a larger global chain of development would follow to house the remaining urban population within a zero carbon environment.

‘This is a summary of the recommendations of the International Scientific Committee as outlined in TBOS.

‘I imagine it will be quite a surprise for them when they learn that, not only have their findings been accepted but, they have been accepted and are to be enacted upon.’

The President, once again had to pause while the members exchanged comments and opinions between themselves.

As the interruption died away the President once more continued his announcement.

‘However; the reality, which is not in the recommendations and has been a carefully guarded secret, is that certain crucial changes will be made. As TBOS points out, the chances of averting

a complete breakdown of our habitat and the ensuing extinction of the vast majority of life, including humanity, while the planet is burdened with the present urban population, is very small indeed, so small in fact as to be impracticable. Therefore, although large areas of useless land will be cleared to create, what appears to be the second phase of eco-city construction, this will just be a subterfuge, as the second round of construction will not be completed. There can no longer be any doubt as to what we are faced with, the placing of a death sentence on billions of fellow human beings in an attempt to avoid the complete annihilation of humanity.’

The room erupted to a clamour of shouting and arm waving, with some leaving their seats. The President patiently waited for a few moments and then, once more striking the lectern, he called for order. After repeating this procedure for some time, the assembly came to order and the members returned to their seats.

The President stood in silence, sweeping his gaze across the assembly, occasionally focusing upon an individual who, without fail, dipped their eyes from the President's penetrating stare.

‘May I remind the members of this assembly that *all* of the proposed details contained within the directive have been cleared in subcommittee and they should be fully familiar with *all* of the points that are being announced at this time. Also, this meeting is in order to ratify the said proposals, this is not the time for negotiation or even discussion.’

‘Any member who does not wish to be involved in these proceedings, and who wishes himself and his family to be accessed on their merits, along with the general population, for housing within an Eco-City, is free to do so.’

Silence reasserted itself as the members digested what had been said and, reprimanded, patiently waited for the President to continue.

‘As we currently have a total population of almost twelve billion, this will leave almost nine billion to fend for themselves with no services, power, medication or sufficient food. The only alternative to abandoning the surplus population would be to employ a programme of mass eradication, which I’m sure no-one has the

stomach for. It still may come to that, should the Directive prove to be insufficient to reverse the current catastrophic global climate changes. This way, at least, some will have a fighting chance and, once the situation is fully appreciated by the redundant population, many may wish to take advantage of the humane medications that will be internationally provided, via their normal medical facilities and health centres for those who wish to spare both themselves and their families the personal unpleasantness that will surely follow.

‘Having secured the environmental integrity of the Super-Cities, two additional options have not been dismissed.

‘Firstly, if necessary, to encourage the reduction in global populations, our geoengineering aircraft could be used to disperse an aerosol carrying biological agents into the upper atmosphere. The favoured option being pathogens that cause common ailments, easily resisted by the majority of the population but, without access to medical facilities, these illnesses would cause widespread fatalities among the weak and burdensome.

‘Secondly, if global warming is not sufficiently arrested by the reduction in CO₂ emissions, the option of, either, using nuclear explosions placed around the deserts and wastelands of the globe to introduce dust particles into the upper atmosphere or, more drastically, use them to trigger volcanic eruptions to achieve the same effect. Either would create a nuclear winter that would rapidly cool the planet and, hopefully reverse the depletion of polar ice and begin the restoration, once more, of a hospitable climate.

‘The nuclear option would be our last resort, as it would also greatly deplete the legitimate population that remained outside of the protection provided by the super-cities, including the agricultural communities upon which we will be depending upon.

The President paused; his arms straight to either side of the lectern, his head bowed projecting a weary demeanour.

Looking up, he quietly summarised the situation, ‘As has been pointed out, many times over the last eighty years, failure to act sooner rather than later would result in even greater hardships and suffering. Our predecessors chose not to act and, as a direct consequence, we have inherited a terrible legacy.

‘Fellow members, this is as late as it gets.’

Of course, for several decades, even before they had conceded that human activity was affecting the global environment, the US, Russia and China were well ahead in making arrangements for precisely this eventuality. Among the major power blocks, only the Federal Republic of Europe, or FRE, had failed to prepare adequately for the time, as was generally referred to by the scientific community as, ‘When the shit hits the fan’.

Chapter XII

THE GREAT DEATH - 2051

Rumours had abounded in connection with some large land acquisitions and mysterious construction projects that were appearing worldwide. The respective governments would only confirm that these developments were part of a co-ordinated, international effort to manage the changing climate. Varying theories were routinely published in the media in an effort to flesh-out exactly what was being constructed, but it was all speculation as no details had leaked or even been hinted at by the authorities.

Some were convinced that additional detention centres, or even death camps, were being constructed. Others claimed that it was huge orbiting spacecraft or underground cities were being built to house the wealthy and powerful until nature stabilised and the surface environment returned to something nearer the conditions that prevailed prior to recent decades. There was also a vain hope among many that there was no real crisis, just a minor fluctuation of nature that would quickly settle down and everything would return to normal. However, very few people had any concept of what normality was before the present escalating environmental crisis developed.

The nation states in the west had long ago defaulted by another name on their unsustainable loans, and had become the property of the banks and corporations. But, even they had finally accepted that economic growth, farmed through taxation, was no longer a profitable formula and it was time to cut their losses.

The first time that the general public received any official information was when a synchronised global announcement was made through all forms of media to their respective populations. In the US, it was during the evening rush hour, through all live media channels, when the President delivered his version of the announcement that heralded, for many, the end of the world.

‘Good evening my fellow Americans. I have great news, our negotiations have finally prevailed upon the other major world powers to obtain an agreement to immediately expand the program of new city construction that will provide new homes for everyone. These cities will be practically zero carbon efficient, yet still provide all the comforts and services that we have all grown accustomed to, and we expect the first families to be moving in within the next two years.

‘These new cities will house the crucial administrative bodies and a selection of ordinary citizens to complete a balanced community. Eventually, sufficient numbers of Super-Cities will be completed across the globe to house the entire world population and provide a safe and secure home for everyone. These superior, carbon efficient neighbourhoods, will be equipped with the very latest communications, travel, and entertainment complexes, and will accommodate the entire international urban population in their respective territories.

‘I am pleased to confirm that many of these projects have already been independently initiated by various governments, which has given rise to much recent speculation but, following a recent summit meeting at the UN, these have now been brought together in a combined international effort to make the necessary adjustments needed to ensure the continued wellbeing of humanity.

‘In the meantime, I ask you to continue your lives as usual as there is no need for you to do anything. All the arrangements are being taken care of and you and your families will be issued your rehousing notifications in due course by your local authorities.

‘I won’t deny that the solution to our developing environmental crisis has been a long time coming, and it will be a great challenge. But, I know, that the great American people will, as they have done before in times of need, come out on top and prevail over our adversities.

‘Thank you and, God bless America.’

The huge new Super-Cities, which were indeed mostly manufactured from plastic, rose like exotic looking fungi across the

temperate zone through North America, Europe and Asia, and at the temperate altitude around mountain ranges throughout the world. Their purpose was to secure as many regions as possible that would continue to provide tolerable climates right up to the maximum level of expected global warming. In theory, each city was interconnected and combined to form one massive array of artificial intelligence, called Baigle, which was in possession of the entire knowledge-base of humanity.

Armed with this information, the EADUN Directive, the global strategy for survival, was in theory being directed for the common good; however, each major power had firewalled their own defence system in order to retain the ability to direct independent military action.

Once the drastic reduction in the domesticated human population had taken place, anticipated to be mostly complete within the first few months after the initiation of EADUN, it was hoped that reforestation and cleaner seas would optimise the natural capture of carbon and, in combination with the various geoengineering projects that had already been running for many decades, it was anticipated that global warming would have slowed and peaked out by the end of the twenty-first century. A rapid cooling was then expected, although there was a chance that it could return the most northerly latitudes to being effectively uninhabitable. Consequently, an international scramble had been under-way for some time, by the northerly nations likely to be effected, to secure other key territories to the south of the projected maximum extent of any future permafrost and glacification.

An alternative scenario, which could be triggered by the gigantic and accelerating release of the greenhouse gas, methane, from beneath the Arctic Ocean, would be a phase of severe warming referred to as Hothouse Earth. This condition could persist for many tens of thousands of years and, from fossil evidence discovered from a previous occurrence of these climatic conditions, much of life on Earth would be unable to survive the alien conditions brought about by such an event.

Whichever alternative future was to come about, it was clear that, at best, it would not include the descendants of the greater part of humanity and, at the worst, humanity would not survive at all.

Following the assumption that global warming could be reversed, Africa in particular was being held in reserve for development as, once the climate had begun to cool, the continent was expected once again to receive a plentiful supply of rainfall. Many of Africa's political leaders had enthusiastically entered partnership agreements with foreign powers in the development of power generating complexes, agriculture, and several new Super-Cities. This willing co-operation had allowed the US and China to establish firm footholds throughout the continent.

The US had wasted no time in establishing a protectorate right across the north from Morocco to the border with Jordan, and had built a chain of solar energy stations along the entire southern Mediterranean coast. The energy provided was being used to construct a dam, the Atlantropa Dam, between Gibraltar and Morocco to protect the Mediterranean coastline from the rising sea level and consequent loss of land. This was a joint venture between the US and the FRE.

The Chinese had long established themselves in sub-Saharan Africa and, whenever possible, they had slowly bought up vast quantities of the continent's land and mineral rights.

Russia, whilst having benefited hugely from being a large landmass in cooler, northern latitudes during the warming period of the planet, had not succeeded in securing substantial interests in any territory to the south. It was assumed that, should it become necessary, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation would simply march into the least well-defended territory that was suitable. The US was paranoid about a possible Russian invasion through Alaska, but it seemed a very unlikely scenario. Should the remaining arctic ice begin to extend southward and compromise Russia's territory, an invasion by Russia into Eastern European states, then down through Asia Minor and Kazakhstan to northern India seemed to be a much more likely proposition.

Details of these strategies, and the true purpose of the newly built facilities, were kept from the global population. And, in spite of many warnings given through the few remaining media outlets not controlled by governments, they were condemned as Conspiracy Theorists; overwhelmed and, largely, ignored by the public who were continually bombarded with soothing news items portraying the wonderful new life within the Super-Cities that was awaiting everyone. But the actual experience of the general population was that, as the key personnel were leaving their homes to settle in the new Cities, for those remaining, life was getting increasingly tougher.

A year had almost passed, following the global announcement, before the subterfuge began to unravel. Even then, the greater part of the population was prevented from discovering that a large proportion of them were to be abandoned by their governments. For many years, exorbitant energy prices had created misery for people on or below average earnings, and cold winters and increasingly hot summers had caused the old and weak to die in their thousands. Work was becoming scarcer and less well paid and, as money became evermore difficult to obtain, the demand for goods and services declined.

National health services had either collapsed or were about to fail. This was due to the growing number of patients dependent upon medication to survive and function normally, the re-emergence of diseases thought to have been eradicated and an explosion of therapy resistant infections.

The events that led to the exposure of the lies and manipulations, carried out by the political and corporate classes, began with a seemingly innocuous item on the national evening news in the US. The news desk lady, Myleena Claws, middle-aged and with far too much history of cosmetic surgery, introduced an item before handing the audience over to their live, on the spot reporter, Doralene Header, a not entirely unattractive female news reporter who was standing outside a terminal at their local airport.

It was dark, apart from some illumination from the terminal building and the additional lighting used by the film crew, when she began her report.

‘Many flights have been cancelled due to technical difficulties with the air traffic control system, as reported to us at a briefing given by the authorities earlier today. Apparently, the guidance systems may have been accessed by an unknown hacker and there were fears that passenger safety may have been compromised and the authorities were not willing to put passenger safety at risk. However, a spokesperson assures me that the situation will shortly be returned to normal.’

As she was delivering her report an aircraft could be seen to take off from behind her, and Myleena cut in, ‘But Doralene, an aircraft is taking off behind you now. It looks like a Skylon passenger liner. Does this mean that the situation regarding the faulty system has been resolved?’

‘I don’t think so Myleena! We were briefed earlier that military aircraft would still be able to operate, as they use a different, more secure system.’

‘But that looked like a civilian airliner. Surely it had the American Airlines tail insignia?’

Before Doralene could reply, the camera returned to Myleena who seemed momentarily confused.

In reality, the task of relocating the necessary civilian population into the new cities had been completed, and all civilian aircraft were being withdrawn as part of the cessation of services in the now redundant towns and cities.

For some time, the support systems for the domesticated population around the globe had been maintained by Baigle, the authority’s global communication and coordination network. Therefore, when the time came to pull the plug on the international urban population, it amounted to little more than tapping ‘Enter’, on a keyboard. What Myleena did not, as yet, realise but would shortly, was that she and millions of other people in the US were about to be deprived of a livelihood in the broadest interpretation of the word.

‘Thank you Doralene, but now we have to go over to Gryph Brockhurst, at Super-City Superior, for an update on the issue that grips the nation. Gryph!’

Gryph was in his mid-thirties, over-groomed and exuding a sickly confidence through a chrome smile which was as charismatic as a squashed fly on a windscreen.

‘Yes Myleena. I’m in a massive assembly hall on the eight floor of the ‘Tower of Citizens,’ the main administrative building in Super-City-Superior.’

He turned to one side and looked out across an unimpeded view of the development to Lake Superior. The city consisted of a breath taking complex of domed roofs and soaring, elegant arches. High above, an optical distortion of the sky revealed the presence of one of the many transparent domes that enclosed the entire city.

‘Yes, Gryph Brockhurst here, speaking to you from the virtually completed Super-City Superior, the primary development of three new eco-cities based around the great lakes. As you can see, I’m standing in one of the many large open spaces made possible by the use of eco-plastic for its construction. Yes, you heard me right, plastic. But this plastic is completely carbon neutral. In fact it is carbon negative as it is made from carbon dioxide that has been removed from the atmosphere.’

As Gryph delivered his slick performance, there were two powerful looking men dressed in black suits who were standing, just out of shot, to one side. The backdrop was a simple green screen and the whole production was being filmed in a redundant factory building.

Gryph nervously continued his performance, trying to avoid looking in the direction of the two men.

‘The three lake cities are being completed as a joint US, Canadian project and, as we know, Super Cities have been constructed worldwide to rehouse the international urban population.

‘Now that the relocation of Government and vital personnel has been completed, I was told, only today by a most reliable source, that we can expect the first of the remaining population to be moving into these cities of palaces within days.

‘Back to you Myleena!’

As the film crew relaxed and began to pack away their equipment, the men in black moved in onto the now terrified looking Gryph. Each clasped an upper arm as Gryph struggled and protested, easily lifting him off his feet as they carried him away, screaming that he had co-operated and done all that they had asked.

‘Thank you Gryph. A great report and I, for one, can’t wait to move in,’ said Myleena.

‘And the weather this weekend is showing no sign of change with night temperatures remaining in the mid thirties, unlike the Lake Cities which I have been informed have an ambient climate control of just twenty two degrees. Bring it on!’

She turned in her seat to look across camera and seemed a little perturbed. Pressing her hand to her ear, she returning to camera and continued.

‘We have a report just coming in that’s...’

She looked aside once more and spoke to someone off camera, ‘Are we sure?’

The transmission was cut. Everyone’s screen became silent and black. The power was down and the whole of North America was in darkness. With the help of Baigle, the international authorities had pulled the plug on the greater part of civilisation.

There was no power, communications or public transport, and the street lighting and traffic controls were no longer functioning. The police and emergency services were no longer functioning, and those first few hours of darkness quickly turned into a horrendous nightmare for the frightened, abandoned urban population.

Once it had become obvious that there was no longer any law enforcement, virtually all the city shops across the US and much of the developed world were looted. Killings, thefts and rapes were epidemic and, well before the end of the following day, street gangs had become the only authorities who were already consolidating their territories.

After the first few days of the blackout, with no heating, water or supplies or food, people who were hiding in their homes began to die. The first were those dependent upon medications, followed by

the frail and elderly. People were eventually forced to scavenge what they could at night in an effort to avoid the gangs, but any that were caught were unlikely to return. Burning buildings and a litter of dead bodies in a miasmatic stink became the normal situation in cities throughout the developed world as the death toll rose. Those able-bodied enough to survive, either became part of the new order of street gangs or fled into the surrounding countryside in the search for food and water.

The overall impression of the security wall around the Lake Cities on the US, Canadian boarder was one of a technological Gothic revival. The creamy white concave walls and buttressed gate houses swept up to over one hundred feet and, above and beyond the wall, the transparent dome above could be seen shimmering in the sunlight. Whether you looked upon the perimeter walls of the cities with fondness or as an intimidating death sentence entirely depended from which side you were viewing them. They would have been something to be admired if they had not, in part, been constructed for the purposes of genocide.

Although only minimal force from the abandoned population had been anticipated by the authorities, the architects had been briefed to provide sufficient defences to survive a significant attack using heavy weapons. The external base of the wall was concave, designed to deflect a blast upwards. It began at over one hundred feet in width at the base, protected by a low concrete wall, quickly tapering down to fifty feet across at the top, crowned by a military highway.

The materials used were a tough combination of sand and carbon reinforced plastic, arranged as a hollow, multi layered construction which was compartmentalised and filled with the loose sand. It was calculated that the structure could easily adsorb the destructive force of a truck full of explosives and, for those fortunate to be allowed into the cities, the impregnable external walls and the towering buildings within represented a reassuring security as they looked out from their apartments.

During the weeks that followed the blackout, the roadway that led up to the main gate of City Superior was flanked by an expanding shanty-town, populated by a large number of desperate people. They had managed to make their way to the city in the belief that there was a place waiting for them, and they hadn't received their relocation information due to a clerical error. When it became apparent there was no error and they wouldn't be allowed into the city, many, having nowhere better to go and being too frightened to return to their old homes, simply waited outside in the false hope that the situation would change and all would be well. This misconception was largely due to the naive moral conditioning, received from more than a century of media propaganda, that good would eventually prevail, no matter how absurd or unlikely. This maintained their hope that their misery would eventually end, which it did when they died of hunger and exposure.

Initially, some of the inhabitants of the shanty town grouped together near the gate, bearing banners and chanting repeatedly, "LET US IN" and, as the occasional convoy of armoured coaches arrived and were let through, they would run up to the open gate in an attempt to gain entry.

These attempts were finally abandoned when a convoy arrived and the protesters, once again, attempted to force their way through a line of troops in riot gear. There was a scuffle and some shots were heard. After the convoy had roared through the gate, five bodies lay on the road surrounded by the subdued crowd.

Within the city walls, The Tower of Citizens, a vertical forest, had become the new home of President Gideon Gripp-Thorn. It had eighty, slightly irregular disc-like floors that resembled a stack of upturned flat mushrooms around a central stem which housed the main accommodation. This internal living space was enclosed in transparent cladding which could either provide expansive views of the city or, in an opaque mode, a screen which could be used for displays in 3D. An additional transparent wall, which could be closed down in inclement weather, enclosed the outer perimeter of the floors which hosted gardens as well as pools, trees and courtyards. This was based on a design originally conceived decades

before in China, and it had become internationally popular in the Super Cities.

Seated at his desk, resting on his elbows and with his head in his hands, the President was alone in his private suite which had high vaulted ceilings and was furnished in the colonial style. The walls had no inside corners and were displaying a tranquil, 360 degree forest scene in 3D complete with ambient sound. An inset image before the President was displaying a view of the abandoned citizens at the city entrance gate; they were removing the bodies of their dead comrades. The President lowered his hands from his head and spoke.

‘Close the external view,’ he said.

The disembodied female voice of the presidents PA replied.

‘I’m sorry. Do you require me to... Close the historical Amazon view, or, do you require me to... Close the live city main gate view?’

‘The main gate!’ the President replied irritably.

The inset window closed to complete the forest view but the presidents vital signs were being interpreted as symptomatic of stress, and the PA asked, ‘I’m sorry. Would you like to hear some therapeutic music?’

‘No, I wouldn’t!’ answered the President. ‘And these forests, put on some live images, something that still exists!’

The President leant back in his chair with his eyes closed as the wall images faded and were slowly replaced by a dead forest. Huge charred tree stumps covered with swathes of ash over a sandy, desert floor surrounded the unseeing President. It was accompanied by the wailing of a desolate wind and, piqued by the sound, the President opened his eyes to look curiously at the new image. For a moment he was confused, until he realised that he was looking at what remained of the Amazon rain-forest.

‘And what the FUCK is this?’ he asked.

As the PA could not determine a rhetorical question from a genuine one, the disembodied female voice smoothly replied, ‘A live view of the Amazon rainforest, in compliance to your request, Mr. President, although I consider it to be unsuitable at this time.’

The President stood and walked slowly around the room, horrified, examining the image.

‘My God.’ he said in despair, ‘What have we done? What more do we have to do?’

‘Mr. President,’ the PA answered, ‘you have one remaining task scheduled for today, an appointment with Professor Sironka Masters.’

‘Agenda?’ the President wearily asked.

‘No agenda has been specified Mr. President.’

‘Direct him here when he arrives then!’ he instructed in a tone of resignation. If his fears were justified, it would not be the first time that he had endured the Professors lectures on morality.

‘We have many beautiful views of the Lake Cities. Would you like me to replace the current scene?’ the PA enquired.

‘Yes, anything!’ replied the President.

As he turned back toward his desk, the walls slowly changed to an elevated view of the city showing the fantastically beautiful, nature inspired architecture under the huge protective, translucent domes.

Far below the Presidents suite, two men were walking through the elevated pedestrian walk-ways towards the Tower of Citizens.

‘Don’t do it Siri,’ said Jim, but he was ignored as Siri continued to walk on purposefully.

‘I’m not at all sure that the president is in any position to change anything, even if he agrees with you,’ Jim persisted.

‘Go home Jim, you’re wasting your time,’ said Siri, increasing his pace.

Jim hurried forward and stepped in front of Siri, halting him with an open hand to his chest. This obstruction greatly annoyed Siri, but Jim was not to be put off.

‘Stop playing the innocent, you knew as well as I did the likely outcome of TBOS.’

‘You mean, like condemning forty-seven percent of people in the US to death? There was never any intention to house everyone and these...Cities – some of them have been under construction for at least a decade and with no thought of accommodating everyone.’

Siri had become over emotional, and he paused for a moment in an attempt to control his feelings.

‘Don’t you see Jim? They’ve used the scientific community as a scapegoat to justify mass murder in order to save themselves!’

‘You’re being a bit harsh there.’ Jim reasoned. ‘Our politicians didn’t create the situation but they’ve had to find a solution.’

‘Ha!’ Siri said with derision, ‘There is no solution. There is no way that we can actively repair the damage done by industrialisation. The only thing that we can do to help is to stop making it worse, put an end to what we have been doing for the last three hundred years.’

‘Exactly,’ interrupted Jim, ‘and what do think EADUN is based on if not just that?’

Siri answered, ‘EADUN was meant to be a lifeboat for everyone to tough it out together, not a death sentence for the masses so that a few can continue to live the good life, and you knew all along!’

Siri’s accusation, whilst true, was hurtful and unjustified.

‘No no, well...Yes! Damn it. And what’s new? If you’d stopped being the idealist for a moment and looked at the math, you would’ve seen for yourself that it couldn’t work. It was too late. Things had gotten too bad, and there just weren’t enough lifeboats to go around and yes, I knew, yes, and so did you. If you couldn’t see it, then you’re not fit to be working on the project so don’t pretend that your not partly responsible.’

Of course Siri had realised that the idea of saving everyone was unrealistic, ever since he first discovered the IPAT Equation as a student. This described how the growing population, affluence, and technology contributed toward environmental impact. But Siri had chosen to turn a blind eye toward the inevitable and disastrous consequences for the many for the sake of the few, if EADUN were to be implemented. Also, under the directive, indigenous peoples were being protected, which included the Maasai. It seemed that Olamayiani’s vision of his son being the saviour of his people had not been unjustified.

He half-heartedly took a step forward, but Jim still blocked his way. Calmer now, Jim tried once more to reason with his friend.

‘It’s not our fault Siri. None of us are to blame; the die was cast at least fifty years ago. Nothing we could have done could have changed things. Nothing!’

Defeated, Siri leant his head against Jim’s shoulder, and Jim put an arm around his distraught friend. Being unsure what else to do, he gave Siri’s back a reassuring pat.

‘It’s okay buddy. It’s okay, come back with me,’ said Jim.

‘Concetta, cancel Professor Sironka Master’s appointment with the President this afternoon.’

The sexy, disembodied voice of Jim’s PA replied, ‘Yes Jimmy, but I need a voice print from Professor Sironka.’

‘Siri?’ Jim asked.

‘Confirmed... Concetta!’ said Siri.

‘Mission accomplished, Jimmy,’ said the PA.

Siri chuckled, ‘Jimmy? And you call your PA, ‘Concetta?’ Siri stood back a little, smiling through a bleary, wet face. ‘Does Lucy know?’

‘No!’ confessed Jim.

‘Why not?’ asked Siri, enjoying Jim’s mild discomfort.

‘I have a kinda fantasy thing about the name Concetta, always have. I don’t know why. Anyway, it’s the last name that I’m likely to use by mistake and mess up the PA, right?’

Siri slowly shook his head.

‘You think you know someone, and all these years you’ve wanted a woman that doesn’t actually exist, called Concetta.

So? Nobody’s fucking perfect!’

They turned together and began to slowly retrace their steps, and Jim said, ‘The best thing for us to do is bury ourselves in our work. We have some dead lakes to resurrect and any number of bio-systems to work on, if we’re to stand a chance of getting through all of this, and we have lost good personnel to the immortality project.

Siri spat out his contempt, ‘Yes, having rid the planet of the surplus population, the bastards want to live forever.’

Siri looked thoughtful before announcing, ‘Jim, I have to get home, to the Maasai Mara. There’s nothing more that I can do here that can’t be carried out by a junior. Will you help me?’

Jim stopped walking. He knew that Siri wouldn't be granted a travel permit and, by assisting Siri to escape, he would be liable to a charge of treason. He took a few paces before replying.

'Sure, I'll see what I can do, but you realize that almost the whole of sub-Saharan Africa is without effective government of any kind. It won't be easy.'

'Yes, well, many of the political and corporate elite in Africa, and elsewhere, bought their way into the Super-Cities with their country's gold reserves. But nowhere outside is going to be easy, but I have to try.'

The two friends continued walking back towards the environmental science block in City Victoria and became, once more, immersed in the task of attempting to repair three-hundred years of industrialisation using advanced biological geoengineering.

Three years later, and to either side of the approach road to City Superior there is an abandoned shanty-town. Around the dereliction there are many hundreds, maybe thousands of grave mounds, a few with posts driven into them. Just outside the gate, to one side, there is an occupied hut with two old bearded men sitting beside it. They have a selection of scavenged items for sale, waiting for passing travellers in the hope of making some exchanges for supplies.

Within the protective wall, tens of hundreds of thousands of people live and work within the many precincts of this elegantly designed hi-rise multi city. It is divided into three levels, each with its own public transport network. The manufacturing and service sector is subterranean with its own city-wide, dedicated underground transport. The ground and lower floors provide recreational and accommodation districts for the service workers, leaving the upper levels available for the administrative and academic personnel. There are no cars or motorised private transports. For independent travel, ordinary citizens have to walk or cycle.

The population inside the Super-Cities, although fortunate, were also virtual prisoners, as obtaining a permit for travel outside the cities was almost unheard of. This, for most of the population,

was not a great hardship as the authorities had made considerable efforts to include residency permits for all the dependents and relations of key personnel in order to ensure their loyalty and obedience. For single citizens with no family; however, it was doubly difficult to obtain travel permits, especially for those who were considered to be of extraordinary importance to the wellbeing of the community.

By this time, the climate in Siri's homeland was experiencing a prolonged drought. When rain came it was too little and quickly evaporated before it could sustain the plants that the cattle depended on for grazing. Also, having been deforested by the rapidly expanding population, much of the central African belt had been reduced to scrubland. Initially, the cleared land had produced bumper crops, genetically engineered to produce their own toxins against insect damage, but the loss of tree cover had allowed the soil to be stripped away to create huge sand-storms that had sometimes lasted for days.

The wildlife had become scarce through drought, starvation and predation by the remaining human population that had become dependant upon bush-meat for survival, and the large herds of ungulates that once traversed East Africa had disappeared. They had been rapidly destroyed by the enclosure of large tracts of land, which prevented them from following their ancient migration routes.

Siri's village was greatly diminished. The traditional weapons of Spears and bows had been replaced with assault rifles bought from the black market using Liloë's funds, and many of the young men had been killed while defending their reduced livestock and meagre crops from well armed outsiders. Liloë's two children had families of their own to provide for and, Lemayian, Siri's oldest son, had become chief following the deaths of Mrjooli and Tonkei. Siri's daughter, Namelok, had taken over the running of the school as Mabel, now in her seventies, was no longer in good health.

Liloë had done all she could to help her family and the village during Siri's absence and she had worked tirelessly to support Lemayian in his roll as headman. But the burden of responsibility and worry had taken its toll, and she had developed serious heart

palpitations which had been diagnosed as coronary artery disease. Liloë could have been surgically treated at the Kilimanjaro Islamic Medical Centre, but she could not be persuaded to leave the village for fear of dying alone, among strangers and away from her family.

One evening, Liloë had complained of dizziness and retired earlier than usual. Later, before sleeping, Namelok had entered Liloë's hut to check on her mother's condition, and had found her sweating and short of breath. Namelok called out for help and soon all of Liloë's family were anxiously gathered around their beloved matriarch. As Namelok cradled her mother's head in her arms, Liloë managed to softly utter, "I have loved you all and, if you see your father again, tell him that I have always loved him from the day when he rescued me. The other children laughed, but he was my hero."

Siri had not been able to visit his home throughout his three years in City Superior, and it was during this time that Liloë had died, leaving him resentful and bitter towards his imprisonment by the authorities.

Chapter XIII

FERAL SURVIVORS - 2054

In the autumn of 2054, Siri was sitting, working at a screen when Jim, wearing a big cheesy grin, entered their department in the City Laboratory.

‘Well,’ said Jim, ‘I think I have some interesting news for you.’

Siri turned in his seat as Jim sat on the corner of his desk and continued, ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t object to a change of scenery for a while. How about a temporary transfer to Paris. Does that sound like a good idea?’

Siri suppressed his excitement and tried to reply with mild irritation.

‘But, Jim, there’s so much to do here.’

Jim couldn’t help but smile at this reaction, but he played along with the act. The authorities were already suspicious of Siri’s loyalty and it was well known that everyone was monitored and, if they became aware of Siri’s wish to abandon his position, he would have no chance of escape.

‘Of course, the old place isn’t exactly the romantic destination it once was,’ Jim continued, ‘but, it’ll be a change. And it’s not likely to be for a few months yet so you’ll be able to ensure that our current projects are in safe hands during our absence.’

Siri asked, ‘*Our* absence?’

‘Sure. You don’t think I’d let you visit Europe while I’m stuck here doing your work for you, do you?’

Siri smiled and nodded in understanding.

‘You say, *transfer*, for what reason?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ Jim began, taking a deep breath, ‘In the face of the alternative possibilities that the Northern hemisphere will either continue to get hotter and dryer or, become much cooler with the renewal and expansion of polar ice, the FRE (*Federal Republic of Europe*) wants to clean up and coordinate all the existing natural water sources beyond the expected limits of any future permafrost.

They hope to be able to coordinate a large enough water supply to be able to return large areas of currently parched farmland into production again, ASAP. It seems that our department's reputation for success in this field has reached our European friend's ears, and we'll be there on a very short term loan to brief them on our work here in the US.'

'Any news of the British Isles?' Siri asked. Without the necessary privileges, reliable information was only available as hearsay, as all sources of information had become an integral part of the governing establishment, restricted on a need-to-know basis.

'Pretty much an irrelevance these days,' said Jim. 'Politically, as you know, Britain has become, for all intense and purposes, an Islamic state and is no longer part of federated Europe. Environmentally, some of the lowlands in the east have effectively been lost to the rising sea level and a good deal of the remaining fertile land has been built over. The remaining farmland has been baked or flooded with the largest remaining undeveloped areas being the higher altitude moorland, only good for 'range maggots,' that's sheep to you, and abandoned wind generators.'

'Yes,' said Siri, 'but what of the people? Up until the plugs were pulled there was a population of over ninety five million.'

'That rather depends on whose version of events you choose to believe. The British authorities insisted, right up to the coup that deposed them, that their post second world war policy of welfare and importing poorly educated, cheap labour had not brought about a collapse of indigenous British society; however, the US has recorded a different scenario.' Jim paused and, for a moment and looked uncomfortable.

'Go on,' said Siri. 'Don't stop now, I've always wondered what the US take was on the Federal Republic of Europe.'

Jim still looked unsure, but continued.

'It seems pointless now, but what I'm about to tell you is restricted information and, although you do have the necessary level of security clearance, until now, you didn't fulfil the 'need-to-know' criteria. I only feel able to repeat this to you *now* because of our trip

to the FRE, and it can be argued that you should be familiar with the situation between our two states.’

‘My God, what are you getting around to telling me,’ said Siri.

‘It’s not a big deal, stating the obvious really, but you should be aware of and avoid saying too much to our European friends.’ Jim stood and gestured toward the refreshment machine. ‘Coffee?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ Siri replied and they wandered over to the vending machine together, but it was Siri that operated it whilst Jim gathered his thoughts and began his explanation.

‘Forgive me for going over some background first.’

Jim began. ‘After the stalemate in Korea and the clime-down in Vietnam, the US made a positive decision that, unless it was unavoidable, they would not put boots on the ground overseas again. But this began to change after the US destroyed the Iraqi invading forces in Kuwait in 1991.

‘The expulsion and destruction of the Iraqi invasion force was so complete that the US and its allies were emboldened to continue to involve themselves openly in other nation’s affairs. For a while all went well until the destruction of the twin towers in New York in 2001, commonly known as 9/11, and Uncle Sam once again used military force with renewed vigour in Afghanistan and again in Iraq two years later.

‘Whilst the US had mistakenly assumed victory against a poorly trained and ill equipped opposition, it was the enemies of the west that had learned the most important lesson, that superior military hardware of the US could not be withstood in a conventional war.

‘Russia and China had refused to become involved in the conflicts of the Islamic nations, other than supply arms to the established despotic leaders and secular governments that were prepared to use whatever force necessary in order to control their subjects. They understood that there were far bigger issues underlying all of the conflicts in the Islamic world. The conviction, for instance, of many Muslims that the world was heading for a global catastrophe out of which Islam alone would rise supreme as

the establishment of a new and everlasting world order. This put them in direct conflict with the US in particular but, not only the US, Israel and Europe were also involved in a long running scheme to control the global economy.

‘For whatever reason, the western powers acted as if they were completely blind to any political or cultural challenge. In Europe, while the authorities strove to suppress the growing disquiet of their indigenous populations, Islam grew in strength. Initially, this was from the continuing influx of Islamic immigrants and their high rate of fertility but, after their policy change from attacking the host populations to the opening up of their convictions to non-believers and assisting the poor, the recruitment to Islam of native Europeans began on a large scale.

‘After the plugs were pulled, the Islamic world was well prepared and, with rioting, looting and killings unchecked, the urban areas were grateful for the protection provided under the authority of the Imams and the UK quickly fell under their control. In very little time, Sharia law was in effect across the entire British Isles, including the military, as Islamists had infiltrated the establishment at every level.

‘It was fortunate that the British nuclear deterrent was still based on submarines which remained out of reach of the new order, although one had to be destroyed by the US following a successful mutiny by the Islamic members of the crew. This is why the UK has no operative super-cities and is now a Muslim state, often referred to as New Pakistan.

‘The old order of political leadership in mainland Europe managed to retain control of its governance by imposing their culture and way of life through education, legislation and, when that failed, through large scale internment and extreme violence; although they don’t like to be reminded of the latter. In particular, the eventual banishment of any religion or political groups that do not regard all of humanity, regardless of faith, as being equal in the eyes of God and the law. These are now outlawed in all the surviving super-cities in the FRE.

‘The mistake that was being continually made by the US was in underestimating the power of the ideology of their enemies, and their belief that the rest of the world would like to be *American*. That is, live in a capitalist democracy where the rich are fabulously wealthy and the poor have little or nothing. On the contrary, this is what the majority of the Islamic world didn’t want, and they rejected it in their own countries.

‘It’s common knowledge and doesn’t require great intelligence to understand that the most harmonious communities are going to be based upon fair play and a wide distribution of wealth among its members with a reasonable level of parity. An utopia, as exists now within the walls of our Super-Cities.’

Jim stood silently for a moment, and then shrugged to indicate that he had finished speaking.

‘Finished?’ asked Siri.

‘I guess so!’ Jim replied.

‘Right. Well, I’ll drink to that then. To our utopia,’ Siri chuckled, sardonically.

Jim raised his coffee cup.

‘Sorry to go on, and this coffee must be getting cold by now,’ and he laughed, before adding, ‘well, that’s roughly how we see it from this side of the pond, so be careful what you say to the Europies.’

Siri was already perfectly aware of the situation in the British Isles and the FRE but, when the facts were expressed so bluntly and laid out with no compassion, he was saddened.

As he stood in silence and drank his coffee, he thought of Oxford. It had been his home amongst people that he had grown to care for, and he imagined the horror of being trapped on an overcrowded island during the first few days, weeks, months after the withdrawal of services. It must have been hell on Earth. Then, for those who survived the starvation and withdrawal of services, to be intimidated into an alien culture; he wondered how many people chose to use the services provided to end it quickly.

Jim had not quite finished. He added, as a passing thought, ‘Of course, Islam could have been stopped in the UK and Europe

decades ago. For the young men, adopting Islam wasn't really a problem, where masturbation is considered to be a more serious crime than rape but, for the women, they stood to lose all the freedoms that had been won for them over previous centuries, and what little they would retain would have to be viewed from the inside of a black bag.

'When you think that half of the voting population were women who owned at least half of the wealth, and all of the pussy, pretty dumb eh? Ironically though, in the event, the abandoned Brits have fared better than their counterparts in mainland Europe where the establishment saved themselves and the abandoned, unwanted bulk of the population have been hunted down like rats. Whereas, in New Pakistan, there are no privileged elite living in tall ivory coloured plastic towers, and everyone that survived the initial weeks are pretty much in the same boat and, apparently, getting by reasonably well. Oh, and one other thing. One way or another, criminals are quickly disposed of. Hands, feet and whoops-a- daisy. Ha ha!'

Jim's monologue had finally irritated Siri and he threw his cup into the recycling chute.

'I'm sure that all you say is very likely correct, but I wish you weren't quite so blasé about the deaths of millions of people when we have been so lucky, maybe even just part of a very selfish group of people who have no rights to remain alive.'

Jim was surprised by Siri's reaction. But, he considered, maybe he had gotten carried away a little.

'Sorry buddy, somehow, from in here, the outside world just seems like the CGI of an old Hollywood movie,'

Jim looked around the large, well equipped room, 'I forget the reality of it all sometimes.'

'I know!' said Siri, 'It's just that, sometimes, I feel so guilty, just for being alive when so many have been abandoned.'

By early spring of the following year, Jim and Siri were on-board a plane crossing the Atlantic and, on arrival, they were taken to their accommodation in a North Paris suburb. It was, 'Super-Ville

de Paris Nord,' one of four super-city developments around Paris. It had been built on the circular site that had previously been occupied by the Paris Disneyland and was two miles in diameter.

At the first opportunity, they arranged to visit the now abandoned Eiffel tower. They had managed to borrow a small all terrain military vehicle to carry them over the intervening distance of over twenty miles from their quarters, and they had arrived soon after first light. Siri was wearing travelling clothes and had brought along a well-equipped backpack; he had no intention of returning to the laboratory. Having climbed up to the top viewing platform at almost one-thousand feet, they leant against the handrail as they recovered from the climb. The ruins of central Paris lay before them and, far below, the river Seine could be seen. It had been reduced to a dirty trickle that sluggishly moved between the dry mud banks to each side, and several large, abandoned river cruise boats that had been tied up and against their concrete moorings had long since sunk into the now exposed mud.

'What will you tell them?' asked Siri.

'Oh, I'll just say you gave me the slip!' Jim replied.

'You think they'll buy that?'

'What choice do they have?' Jim answered as he turned to face Siri and confessed, 'It should have been you heading our team Siri. You're by far the brightest and gifted of any in our department.'

Jim turned back, and they both gazed at the horizon as Jim continued, 'I don't know exactly why they chose me and not you as the team leader. It may have been because of you not being a US national, I really don't know but I just had to tell you.'

'Thanks, but it's all water under the bridge now, isn't it. I appreciate your sentiment but, you were the man for the job, I'm sure of that. But I think you may be right about prejudice against non US nationals. Throughout my time with the department I have never felt... I don't know... *trusted* might be the word for it.'

Jim felt ill at ease and he hurriedly changed the subject.

'I hope you make it Siri. You've been a good friend and colleague and I'll miss you'

‘Thanks, you too, but you’d better go back now or they’ll be looking for both of us.’

They turned to face one another.

‘Yeah right. I know that I have Lucy and the kids, safe back home in City-Superior, but I can’t help feeling jealous about your journey. I know it will be dangerous and I wouldn’t give any one else but you a hope in hell of succeeding but, even so...’

Siri laughed, ‘Ever the romantic. Get back to your family as soon as you can and forget about me Jim. Life is too short to worry about what you might be missing, or the fate of other people. You’re one of the lucky ones with a pivotal position at the start of our brave new world; make the most of it. Who knows, the powers that be might consider you to be worthy of immortality.’

Jim smiled in resignation as the two men briefly hugged before Jim turned to make his way back down to ground level.

‘Watch your back,’ Siri called after him, and he half turned and replied, ‘I will, and you take care now!’

As Jim made the long descent down the rusted iron stairs, Siri spent a while looking out over the striking architecture of Paris, the city of romance. From his vantage point there were few signs that anything was wrong. He almost expected the early morning trinket stalls to arrive at any moment to clutter the surrounding streets with their Eiffel Tower souvenirs. But he knew that, at ground level, the pitiful remains of the once proud, some would say arrogant, Parisians were to be found everywhere. Desiccated body parts and personal possessions had been blown and had drifted into every shaded corner. And both the dogs and the surviving people had become feral and hunted in packs.

‘City of romance? More like the city of rats!’ Siri thought to himself.

He saw Jim’s military vehicle heading north and began his decent to the deserted streets below. Alone, and at fifty-five years of age, he began his journey on foot in a southerly direction towards the Parisian suburbs, and he wondered at his sanity.

It was the first time that he had walked among a deserted city, and it was unnerving to think about the millions of dead and, with no

transport and the likelihood of dangerous encounters, the journey ahead was theoretically impossible.

On almost every street there were the remains of EXIT points, which had been installed shortly before the shutdown, under the guise of being public toilets. These were fully automated cubicles with transparent fronts that an individual, wishing to escape from existence, entered and sat comfortably while their physical condition was instantly accessed. This was followed by a final opportunity to leave before a cocktail of anesthetising and euphoric drugs were released into the cubical. The effects could be seen from outside to reassure any watchers that the process was not only painless but was also pleasurable.

Once the individual had passed into a blissful unconsciousness, the cubical would revolve and, either a lethal injection would be administered and the body passed on to an airtight skip for collection when full or, if the assets of the body were required, it would be further anesthetised and preserved in a drug induced state of hibernation for harvesting.

These were initially operated correctly, but they became a source of amusement for the members of street gangs who used them to perform amusing executions. Also, they were frequently disabled by being broken into for the supplies of drugs they contained. Drugs had become the new currency, and the units were briefly referred to as Cash-Points, until the authorities abandoned them and they fell into disuse.

The city was not entirely deserted, on several occasions Siri had caught a glimpse of someone or something peering at him from behind cover, apparently too frightened to show themselves. He knew that the citizens of the FRE had fared far worse than the US, Russia or China. Maybe the Indian Subcontinent and Africa had had a worse time of it but not by very much. A mass exodus from the south had migrated north where the compressed population had been trapped under Russian territory like a pressure cooker and, with hundreds of millions of immigrants stampeding north to escape the blistering heat and desiccation of Africa, the situation had become impossible long before TBOS had been implemented.

The survivors had mostly taken to a nomadic way of life, migrating north in the summer to avoid the worst of the scorching heat and, from the few reports that Siri had heard, they were best avoided. Worse still, for anyone attempting unauthorised travel, the regular helicopter patrols from the European Super Cities had unofficially adopted a shoot to kill policy whenever they discovered feral humans in their district of authority. In spite of all these dangers, Siri's one remaining desire was to return to his family and the Maasai Mara before succumbing to disease or old age or, increasingly more likely, being killed by a feral.

A military plane roared overhead in a northerly direction and, as Siri followed its flight path, he could see the Eiffel Tower, standing above the deserted city skyline in the distance. His journey had barely begun, and he turned away to continue walking south.

As he made his way through the outskirts of Paris, there was the occasional dog bark and a distant gun shot to remind him that he needed to be very much on his guard and, shortly before nightfall, Siri found shelter in an abandoned tour bus.

Most of the tinted windows were intact and, from the wide back seat, where he stretched out for the night, he had a clear view of the surrounding street. He quickly fell asleep, but his rest was broken many times in the night by unidentified and worrying sounds. On the last occasion, soon after dawn, whatever was responsible was loud and seemed to be very near. He was so alarmed that he lay awake for some time, listening intently, but the noise was not repeated, and he eventually returned to a deep sleep. When he reawakened, it was late-morning and the sun was high and hot and penetrating the metal body of the ruined bus and, as he lay, contemplating what the day ahead might bring, a prolonged shrieking sound erupted somewhere nearby. He quickly rose and packed his gear before cautiously leaving his refuge to follow the sound and investigate. The sound burst into life again, just ahead but, as yet, out of sight, and he silently made his way forward to investigate the potential level of danger before risking discovery.

Common sense told Siri that nothing could be gained by an encounter with whatever was making, let alone causing the shrieks,

but he was curious to discover the cause of the unholy noise. He regretted that he had been able to obtain a weapon, but to either officially or unofficially get hold of any sort of gun, under the prevailing conditions and restrictions in the Super Cities, had proved to be impossible.

He advanced with extra caution through a ruined house and, by carefully looking out through a gap in the masonry, he surveyed a strange group of people with their even stranger machinery. Siri could see twenty or more people gathered around an open space that once must have been a small park surrounded by a square of shops and cafés. The people were of both sexes, assorted ages and of mixed race appearance. The women generally had long, black, oily hair and the men, dreadlocks and beards. Many were half-naked, including the women, and all seemed to be heavily tattooed and wearing inordinate amounts of jewellery in the form of heavy gold necklaces, bangles and finger rings. Some were lounging near a cooking fire, and others were tinkering with what looked to Siri like useless mechanical junk. Old engines and machinery had been collected, and these people were salvaging and repairing what they could.

Siri could see that some sort of distillation was being carried out on an industrialised scale over a number of small, dirty fires which burned sullenly under a complex of large metal drums and copper pipes; they were distilling fuel for their vehicles.

Parked around the site was a collection of old trucks, including an ancient steam traction engine which was hitched to what appeared to be an antique howitzer. Although the vehicles were obviously very old, they were also well maintained and, although they had all been painted in various camouflage designs, many of the details of the wheels had been picked out in gold and red; the traction engine, in particular, was highly decorated beneath its sand and olive green painted canopy. Some of the vehicles were hitched to ancient looking caravans, but most were towing open trailers which were largely full of barrels or short lengths of salvaged timbers. These had been cut up by a small and ancient stationary engine which could be seen coupled to a saw bench beside a huge

pile of saw dust; it was the scream of the saw that had awoken and alarmed Siri at first light.

Suspended above the encampment, upon long polls, were many camouflaged nets in different shades of brown so that, from above, the square would simply appear to be an area of parched vegetation. Siri recognized these people from military accounts inside Super-Ville de Paris Nord, and he whispered their name to himself, 'Dravidiens!'

The stopped their work and were evidently about to take a break, possibly lunch, as the sound of raucous recorded music began, and Siri noticed a large joint of meat on a crude spit that was being turned over a fire. The cook was a teenage, redheaded girl, dressed in a few rags with no tattoos or jewellery.

The group didn't look overtly menacing, and there was even something darkly attractive about them, but Sironka had heard plenty of tales and rumours about the Dravidiens violence and strange practices of witchcraft and sacrificial rituals. There seemed to be little to no chance of peacefully passing an hour or two exchanging information with these people, and it was time to leave before he was discovered.

Just as he had decided to move on, his attention turned to a naked, light complexioned fat man to the other side of the clearing. Siri thought he could just make out that the man was copulating with, what appeared to be, a very overweight woman. But the view was partially obscured by the shimmer of the cooking fire, and it was only when the man knelt up and turned his partner over that Siri could see that it was in fact two naked older women tied back to back. Their arms were linked at the elbows, their wrists roped across their chests and their mouths were gagged. The man struggled to turn them and proceeded to enter the second woman who was covered in dust from having been face down bearing the weight of the other two members of the threesome. Both victims were sobbing. This was a French speaking community and the fat man, whose name was Fabrice, shouted.

'Shut the fuck up, bitch!' as he struck his current sexual partner across the face.

One of the men in a nearby group turned and shouted over his shoulder.

‘Hey, Fatso, be careful with the food. I don’t mind you fuckin it, but if it dies it won’t keep.’

A woman joined in the heckling.

‘I ent eatin nothin that’s been fucked by Fatso. I might catch summut.’

At this comment, the first heckler turned to the woman and jeered, ‘Dint yer mam teach you nothin? It’ll be safe enough provided you cook it plenty, even *after* Fatso’s fucked it.’

The whole group within earshot laughed at this comment as the man continued, ‘Anyway, what can *you* catch that you ent got already?’

The woman sprang up in a rage and leaped upon the man, shouting abuse and punching at him, trying to pull at his hair while he laughed and easily deflected her attacks.

Fabrice called back.

‘Shut up you lot, you’re puttin me off me stroke,’ and the group continued to laugh and catcall.

Sironka was not overly surprised; he had heard many tales from the military regarding some of the degenerate behaviour of the ferals, and the Dravidiens in particular. He was about to slip away when he noticed the source of the meat on the fire. It was a partially dismembered human carcass that was hanging upside down in a nearby ruined building. It hung on a meat hook that had been pushed through the remaining ankle. Siri had seen enough, and he crept back to skirt around the group.

Once their distant laughter and horrible music was to his back he began to relax but, as he turned the corner of a building, he almost collided with a brawny young male Dravid. Initially, both were startled, but the young man quickly regained his composure, smiled, and drew a long, evil looking knife.

‘Well well, what have we here, an *old man*?’ he said. ‘Just turn around and start walking!’

‘What do you want with an old man?’ Siri asked.

‘You’ll see soon enough!’ the Dravid replied.

As Siri began to turn, he struck out and kicked the young man's groin and, while clutching at his genitals, Siri dodged around and ran. But the Dravid, filled with rage, quickly recovered and gave chase.

Siri had always taken care of his health and, normally, he would have had little trouble outdistancing this opponent who was too heavily built to sustain a fast pace over any distance. But Siri mistakenly ran into a dead end, a street ending with a damaged spiked iron rail fence. Too late to back track or to attempt to climb or squeeze through the fence without being attacked, he was forced to turn and stand his ground. Several of the round and rusted iron uprights from the railing were scattered on the ground, and Siri grabbed one and held it out in front of him just as his pursuer arrived. Its weight was not unlike a lion-hunting spear, and Siri intended to make the best of his unexpected advantage.

Having discovered that Siri was not only nimble and quick on his feet, but was now supremely confident whilst holding a six-foot iron railing, was too much for the Dravid's confidence and he began to back away. Holding his knife out defensively, he began to shout for help in the direction of the camp and, although it was unlikely that the others would hear his shouts at that distance over their music, if he succeeded in attracting their attention, Siri would be a dead man. Even if Siri made a run for it he would very likely be hunted down and he had no intention of allowing that to happen.

Siri followed his attacker closely enough to make it impossible for him to turn without exposing his back, and the Dravid had to continue to shuffle backwards. The tables had turned and Siri was waiting for an opportunity to finish him as quickly as possible. Inevitably, he stumbled and, even though he brought his knife up to block the thrust, he had no chance of deflecting the weight of the iron rail. The blow struck him in the centre of his chest and knocked him flat on his back and Siri struck again but, this time, it took the man in the throat. As he lay writhing with his blooded fingers clutching at his blood gushing neck, one more carefully aimed thrust through an eye socket passed through the back of his skull and on into the ground below and, after a few moments of violent twitching

against the firmly staked head, the body lay still. Siri immediately left the scene, abandoning the railing, which remained upright through the corpse and looked like a primitive tribal boundary marker.

It was the first time that Siri had killed a human being and he had expected to be traumatised by the event; however, unlike the innocent lion that he had killed as a young man in the savannah, he had no sympathy for the Dravid, and he was happy that these people were frequently hunted down by the authorities.

After several, thankfully, uneventful days of walking, Siri was feeling optimistic. He had successfully avoided further trouble as he passed out of the Parisian suburbs and he had finally reached open countryside.

When Siri had first decided to abandon his secure life working on the EADUN project and return to the Maasai Mara, he thought his chances of succeeding were pretty slim, but he now considered it to have been well worth the gamble, if only to be rid of the claustrophobic environment inside the hermetically sealed cities. The weather was dry but not too hot, and the surrounding countryside was fairly flat with a good view in most directions. The skeletal remains of many dead trees, both standing and fallen, were everywhere. These were the remains of the last of the native species to give up the ghost, unable to cope with the arid conditions. Only the occasional ornamental tree or collection of shrubs and bushes survived among the cracked dry earth, remnants from long abandoned ornamental parks and gardens. With the exception of the dead trees, the environment was not too dissimilar to the Maasai Mara and, for the first time in several years, following his last visit to his village, Siri was feeling at home and in his element. Although the weather was hot and dry and there were no signs of habitation, he managed to forage enough bush-tucker to eke out his supplies of dried food. This had consisted mostly of roots and scorpions with the occasional snake, as desert creatures had become plentiful throughout Southern Europe, thriving in the hot dry conditions.

Long before midday, the early summer sun was far too hot for wearing conventional clothing and Siri paused in the shade of a tree

to remove his back-pack. He stripped to the waist, cut away his trouser legs below the knee and, slinging his gear back across his bare shoulders, he continued his journey. His confined lower body was still too hot and sweaty, but he continued walking in the full midday sun until he discovered a group of abandoned dwellings. After a thorough search of the buildings he was disappointed, but not surprised, to find nothing much of value, but he was delighted to find a red tartan blanket that he could wear in traditional Maasai fashion.

With his newly acquired attire and looking like a true Maasai warrior, he continued on his journey in high spirits. Finding the blanket had seemed like a good omen and things weren't going too badly, until Siri noticed some familiar looking animal dung on the road ahead. As he drew nearer he grew concerned. Squatting on his haunches over the dung, he picked up a small piece and squeezed, then lifted it to his nose and sniffed. It was old and dry, but recognisable.

He spoke softly to himself.

'So, my countryman, we are both far from home. Are you alone like me I wonder, or do you have a family?'

Standing, he turned and gazed about him into the distance and spoke once more to the unseen creature.

'I do not mean to offend but, if so, I do not wish to meet your wives.'

Throwing the faeces to one side he continued along the road, but now he walked with heightened awareness.

It was early July and too hot to sleep well but, that night, soon after he eventually managed to slumber, something startled him awake.

He lay still and attentive in his temporary shelter against the trunk of a large tree. The night was silent but the memory of a familiar yet alarming sound in his dreams filled his mind. After several minutes of listening to the racket made by the cicadas, he would have been ready to dismiss his fears if it were not for the droppings found on the road the previous day.

The roar of a lion once more cut through the night and, worse still, the sound was coming from downwind. Siri had chosen his sleeping place carefully, and he quickly recovered his backpack and started to climb the tree. It wasn't easy as the lower branches had been browsed away, and he had to jump to reach the lowest handhold. Furthermore, he was not as fit as he once was and, with the added weight of the backpack, he missed his aim and collapsed on to the ground. The lion uttered another roar through the darkness, much closer than before, as Siri quickly got up and redoubled his efforts.

This time, with great difficulty, he succeeded in heaving himself up into the tree, and he made a mental note to make a greater allowance in the future for his aging physique. As he moved higher in the tree and found a suitable fork in which to wedge himself, the roaring was heard again but, this time, from further away. Siri's presence had either gone undetected, or the animal wasn't interested in hunting. After his scare, and whilst clinging onto his perch, it took quite some time for sleep to return, and then only in short bouts of unconsciousness.

As the first signs of daylight began to show across the horizon, Siri gratefully abandoned his extremely uncomfortable branch and returned to the ground. He was acutely aware of his inability to defend himself and, as he was only in possession of a pitifully small, general-purpose knife, he urgently set out to find some way to improvise a practicable weapon. He discovered a group of small cedar trees nearby and cut two poles, each around seven feet long. These he whittled into crude spears and hardened the points over his breakfast fire. After packing his things away, he warily continued his journey southward along the deserted road with one of his improvised spears strapped across his back and the other held as a staff.

After walking for several miles, Siri briefly saw a figure appear ahead in the far distance. They appeared to be wearing blue jeans and a white shirt and didn't look at all threatening, but it was difficult to be sure at that distance. It was several hundred yards away and, after they had briefly looked in Siri's direction, they ran

out of sight into some vegetation. He walked on and, when he reached the point where the individual had appeared, he found a ruined building amongst some ornamental trees and he cautiously walked over to investigate. Peering inside through an empty window frame, Siri could see no signs of recent habitation. He entered through the broken doorway and searched the single-story building for anything of use but he only found a jumble of old clothes, rather like a nest, which was in a cupboard under the stairs that led to the attic. This, he thought, must be the unknown stranger's sleeping place, and he left the building to continue on his journey.

After having covered a few more miles at an easy pace, Siri again saw a movement ahead. It was amongst some scrub to one side of the road near a large dead tree, but it was impossible to identify whether or not the movement was a human or an animal, and the lion from the previous night was still very much on his mind. He turned his head to check the wind direction and, as he was already down wind from where he saw movement, he decided to continue with caution.

Moving closer, making use of the long dry grasses and stunted bushes for cover, Siri peered over the vegetation. He could see a figure sitting on a heavy log to the side of a small dead camp fire and, in spite of the hot daytime temperature, it was hunched over with a blanket covering its shoulders and wearing a wide brimmed hat. Nearby, a rusted shipping container had been jammed under the dead tree and, although it was badly weathered, Siri could see that at one time it had been painted with some sort of foliage design, overwritten with large, now unreadable, ornamental lettering.

Siri waited for a while expecting the figure to move but, after more than ten minutes had passed without change and not having seen any sign of danger, he decided that it would be safe to approach the figure.

He was still very cautious and advanced behind his make-do spear. At around twenty paces he called out, but there was no movement or reply from the figure. A few more steps and he could just see the end of a stake that was poking up behind the head from

beneath the blanket. He froze as his mind raced to understand the implications.

‘Don’t move negro!’ came a high-pitched, childlike woman’s voice from behind him.

Even if Siri had not understood the French language, from its tone alone, Siri would have understood the meaning of the command. He was wondering what to do next when the owner of the voice, seemingly alone, small and weak, solved his dilemma for him.

‘Drop the stick and turn around *very* slowly negro!’

It didn’t sound like a bluff, and Siri dropped his makeshift spear and turned as commanded. The voice belonged to a short and overly plump woman with long, unkempt hair that would have liked to have fallen in ringlets but, under the grease and dirt, it had to be content with half hearted, matted dreadlocks. She smiled at him with tombstone teeth over the sights of a Mossberg Tactical Shotgun, a rare weapon that would have been highly prized amongst the abandoned feral population. He could also see that she had a machete, sheathed and hanging from a loose belt like a gunslinger. Her name was Sale Tuyau, but those who had known her simple called her Sally.

‘Well, aren’t I the lucky one? Two in one day. You wait for lunch to come by for three days and then two arrive in one afternoon, I hardly had time to see to *that* one before you turned up,’ she squeaked as she gestured to the figure sitting by the dead fire. She laughed, an ugly girl like giggle, and waved her gun towards the camp.

‘Move, negro!’ she commanded.

Siri walked towards the camp, followed by his ambusher. She stopped him short of the dead camper sitting at the dead fire.

‘Okay friend, drop the backpack and get the fire going and, when that’s done, you can roast a leg then butcher and hang out the rest in strips to dry,’ she said, briefly pointing the gun at the seated figure.

There were piles of split timber set around the camp, and more heavy logs to work on.

‘And guess what’s on the menu when that one’s finished?’ Sally chuckled, as Siri began to collect some tinder. She didn’t wait for an answer; instead, she continued to babble on in her irritating voice.

‘In the meantime, it will be nice to have dinner cooked for me again. it’s been a long time and such a handsome cook, if a little old for the pot but, never mind, beggars can’t be choosers.’

Her constant chatter in her high pitched squeak was grating with Siri’s nerves and he was determined that he was going to rid the world of this piece of filth. But, for the time being, he would have to endure. Sally moved around him as she chatted and collected his back-pack then, finally settling down, she squatted on one of the logs, rummaging through his belongings. This placed her upwind of Siri and the waves of ammonia that washed over Siri’s keen sense of smell, almost made him retch as she continued her chatter.

‘If you’re lucky, maybe you might get to give a lonely woman a little pleasure before you go into the pot, eh? Would you like that Negro? Hee hee. If you’re really good to Sally I might even keep you alive for a while, until I get bored.’

Siri could see an axe, just out of reach, stuck in one of the larger logs between him and Sally, and he was seriously tempted to go for it, but it was too risky and, by the sounds of things, he had some time to spare before the situation became critical. The threat; however, of having to couple with Sally, had decided him on acting sooner rather than later at the very first realistic opportunity. The thought of being intimate with the repulsive harridan made anything seem worth the risk in order to escape.

Sally remained seated on her log as she began to smoke a foul smelling pipe while Siri completed building the fire. At least the smoke from the fire and her herbal mix went some way toward masking the smell of stale piss that came from her body, and he turned his attention to the corpse.

To his horror, when he removed the hat and blanket, he saw the broken bloodied head of a young woman with short hair. She was dressed in male clothing. He recalled her blue jeans and white shirt from the figure in the road earlier that day. The stake that

supported the body had been pushed down her back under her shirt and driven into the ground, concealed by the blanket and hat. Even through the congealed blood and bone splinters, that were the remnants of one side of her head, Siri could see that she had been young and beautiful and, he assumed, the male clothing was a disguise in an attempt to escape unwanted male attentions. The poor girl surely couldn't have imagined falling into the hands of a monster like Sally. In Siri's male mind, the discovery that Sally's victim had been a beautiful young girl made the crime immeasurably worse and, for a moment, his hatred for Sally flared and the desire to smash her was more than he could control. His gaze levelled on the axe. Sally had her gun lying across her knees while she was amusing herself with the contents of Siri's pack. Siri squinted into the sun; Sally had been no fool when she had chosen to sit with it behind her. He tried to calculate his chances of reaching the axe and burying it in Sally's head before she could react.

Alarmed, as if sensing his thoughts, Sally stood and stepped back a couple of paces, levelling the gun at Siri's upper body as she gave a warning.

'No way negro. Put it out of your mind. I'd have you before you got half way, and then I'd have no-one to do the butchering for me.' She giggled again.

From the long dry grass behind her, a huge shadow emerged and Sally was lifted from her feet as she hurtled through the air towards Siri. He instinctively stepped back in shock as she landed, face down, sprawled across the ground only a few paces away with a male lion pinning her to the ground. It was attempting to get a grip on the woman's fat neck as she produced a constant, high pitched scream. But it was hardly audible as her face was being forced into the ground. Siri was frozen in awe of the power and violence of the attack. He knew he should do something but he couldn't break the spell that held him, and he merely took a few more paces backward.

The lion eventually managed to grip through Sally's neck, and a loud crack put a stop to her noise. Siri watched as the animal raked through the ragged clothing and into the fat-laden flesh of the now dead woman. The lion didn't seem at all perturbed by the closeness

of Siri and, now that the lion had settled to his meal, he could see just how thin and in what poor condition it was with the signs of several wounds across its body. The gun has been flung past Siri at the time of the impact, and he slowly sidled sideways to retrieve it but, as he reached out for the gun, the lion paused in its feasting and fixed its stare on Siri, rumbling a threat. He had to withdraw his hand in order to placate it but, after a few moments, he retried but once more the lion issued a warning. Siri desperately wanted the shot-gun, and he decided that worth a risk to acquire it.

Knowing that the lion must be from captivity and would, very likely, be used to humans at close quarters, Siri softly moved a little closer and, as he did so, he talked soothingly to it in French. At first the lion rumbled and snarled but Siri remained still and held his ground. He switched to a Maasai lullaby and the lion gradually ignored him and returned to his meal. As Siri continued to softly sing he slowly moved back to the gun and, this time, he managed to recover the weapon. Keeping it hidden, he backed away to the container where he checked the gun and found that it was fully loaded, and the safety was off. Sally was right; he wouldn't have made it to the axe.

The lion seemed to have forgotten about him for the time being, so he leant the gun against the tree and examined the container doors. They were locked and he cursed, as he had hoped to find something useful. He looked back at Sally's corpse, which was still being dismantled by the lion, and decided that she must have the key. But how to get it, and was it worth the risk for what might be an empty container?

His backpack and its emptied contents were scattered to the other side of the body and there was no guarantee that he would be able to recover it. If he abandoned his belongings he would have no provisions and there could have been all kinds of supplies in the container, or nothing, but it must have been locked for a reason. Sitting with his back against the tree, the gun across his lap, he decided to wait until the lion had finished its meal and, hopefully, it would leave and allow Siri to search Sally's remains but, instead, he fell asleep.

Waking to the chill of first light, the memory of the lion immediately struck him with fear but, he was obviously still alive. Struggling to clear his head, he looked toward the site of the previous day's drama and a thin wisp of smoke could be seen rising from the ashes of the almost dead fire with what remained of Sally's body alongside. Unfortunately, so was the lion, which was staring directly at Siri from where he lay. Satiated with a heavy meal and, rather like a domestic cat, he had evidently enjoyed sleeping in the warmth given off from the fire.

Siri sat silently, and the lion soon lost interest in him and lowered his head to doze once more. As he waited, the morning sun rose and soon it became uncomfortably hot. The lion seemed to have no inclination towards moving away from the human wreckage and was very likely guarding its food, it could have remained there for several days, although it would eventually have to find water. Siri reluctantly decided that he was wasting his time and he abandoned any idea of reclaiming his possessions or opening the container. Gathering his legs beneath him and using the gun for a prop he slowly stood, intending to slip quietly away. But, as he did so, the lion also got to his feet and trotted off a few dozen yards to lie, once more, facing him from within some poor shade provided by some scrub. This was some unexpected good luck and, as soon as the lion appeared to be settled in his new resting place, Siri recovered his pack and scattered belongings before poking about among Sally's tangled remains of bones and clothing. The smell that arose from disturbing her corpse was almost as unpleasant as it had been in life but he persevered. He noticed a leather thong which was blackened with dry blood and tangled around the exposed vertebrae below her mauled head. As he pulled the thong, a number of objects were dragged from below some scraps of flesh and clotted blood, including some promising looking keys. Remembering the machete, Siri found it and cut the thong to allow him to release the keys. Then he recovered the gory belt, complete with the sheath for the machete, and fastened it around his waist.

Armed with the machete and keys, Siri returned to the container in high hopes of finding some useful supplies, and he was

delighted to find a key that fitted. Heaving the doors open, he was immediately struck by a familiar foul smell, and he had to take a step back from the entrance and wait for the stink to disperse before he could face investigating the inside.

At first, it was too dark after the glare of the sunlight to see anything inside but, once he had stepped onto the threshold, his vision adjusted and allowed him to focus on to the contents. Some light and air had been allowed entrance through a few small, oblong openings, just below the ceiling to each of the side walls, and the interior could be divided by a number of timber partitions which were currently folded flat against one side. The container appeared to have been designed for the transport of horses or some other kind of livestock, but now it was plainly a living place, complete with some crudely-made furniture. Even from the open doorway the stink was almost unbearable, and Siri could see nothing worthwhile to plunder.

He was about to turn away and leave when he spotted several boxes of shotgun cartridges on a ledge, to one side near the entrance. Holding his breath, he stepped into the gloom and began to collect the ammunition when, to his delight, he noticed a brightly painted bicycle. Having carefully stowed the cartridges in his backpack he moved further in, but there was the sound of movement in the depths of the container. Quickly recovering the shot-gun, he knelt to one side of the entrance and levelled the gun into the gloom.

‘Come out, I can see you there,’ he commanded in French, but there was no response. Siri moved back a little, wondering if he might have imagined it.

‘Come out now, or I will shoot you,’ he commanded.

Again there was the sound of movement from the back of the container and, one by one, what looked like three small children emerged from behind the assorted junk. The first to emerge was the largest and looked around nine years old, with two younger ones at maybe six or seven. They were all feral and dirty with wild eyes, each brandishing a small calibre hand-gun, all of which were aimed into Siri’s face. He didn’t lower his weapon but backed away into the open with the children following him into the daylight which

revealed his mistake. What he had taken for young children were in fact adults. The largest looked elderly and was a male dwarf with a normal sized head and undersized limbs. The other two were tiny homunculi of indeterminate gender. For a few moments, Siri was mesmerised by the novel scene and found himself speculating on how these people had managed to survive, when so many normal people had died. He snapped out of his reverie, nothing was normal any more and certainly not the present situation.

It seemed that it was stalemate until one of the trio noticed the head and limbs amongst the blooded rags that were all that remained of Sally. He pointed them out to the other two, and all three began to make ugly, mewling noises which grew in volume as they looked accusingly at Siri. They were obviously about to shoot him, and Siri had decided to use his weapon first. They were grouped fairly close to one another and he hoped that the spread from the gun would be sufficient to disable more than one with the first shot, leaving time to shoot the third. It was a gamble but, as he began to squeeze on the trigger, their raucous noise had finally attracted the attention of the lion, which stood and made a threatening growl as it gazed at them. On seeing the lion, the small folk recognised the true culprit and, ignoring Siri, they ran over to the body. He watched as they reached out and tenderly touched the few pieces that were recognisable while softly wailing and crying to one another. This might have continued for some time, but their continued presence and noise further agitated the lion and it gave a louder warning. The grieving trio became silent and, after exchanging glances, they raised their weapons and purposely walked towards it.

Siri was sick of the whole business and he turned to leave them all to their fate, lion and...whatever, he had had more than enough of the lot of them and he wanted to get as far away as quickly as possible. He grabbed the bike along with a couple of spare wheels that were hanging nearby, and was gone. As he peddled away, he could hear a cacophony of roars from the lion, screams from the trio and gun-shots. He strove to increase his speed to be out of hearing range of the encampment but the bicycle wheels were too small and hopelessly off-centred, which resulted in a violently, bouncing ride.

The sight may have been amusing for a witness but it was desperately uncomfortable for the rider and it was quite impossible to maintain any sort of speed. Siri almost abandoned the bike to continue his journey on foot, but he continued in the hope that the spare wheels would be an improvement.

After covering a mile or so, he was forced to stop as he was no longer able to endure the bucking bike. He gratefully dismounted and pushed it over to a nearby ruined cottage where he leant it against an old stone garden wall and examined his acquisition. It was painted yellow with blue and red bubbles, and a metal panel filled the space between the frame with the words, Cirque d'Hiver Bouglione, painted on both sides in large red and blue ornamental lettering. 'So that was it,' he thought, 'a circus bike, once used by the freak show that had intended to eat him.'

It was in need of a good clean but was still in good order, and he began to examine it more closely. It had two panniers over the back wheel and a large carrying frame in front of the handlebars. Each carrier was padded out with dirty old clothes and, after removing the two spare wheels from the front carrier, he removed the rags and cast them aside. The spare wheels seemed to be in good order and looked as if they were correctly centred.

After some rummaging in a roofless outbuilding, he discovered some old, rusty tools with which he managed to exchange the two corrupted wheels for the two spares that were indeed the correct size for the bike. It was strongly built, obviously intended for a heavy workload, and he could see how all four of the previous owners could have ridden on it. The two small ones could have sat in the strong frame to the front of the handlebars, while one peddled and the fourth sat astride the rear carrier.

Now that the bike had the correct wheels, the side stand could be used and, as he prepared and ate his meal beside the remains of the collapsed stone wall, he reflected on his good fortune at acquiring a reliable and silent means of travel. Siri had intended to search for a means of crossing the Mediterranean at the first point of contact with the coast but, now that he had the bike, he considered it might be worth reducing the length of the sea voyage by travelling

further south into Spain; maybe even try for a crossing at the Atlantropa Dam across the entrance to the Mediterranean. He would have to wait and see what fate would come up with in the mean time.

Exhausted by his recent experience, Siri remained at the ruins overnight and endured a night of bad dreams interspersed with long periods of sleeplessness. It was as the morning sun rose, silently baking the stone wall and its population of small green lizards that had emerged in the stillness to hunt flies, that the previous day's encounter struck home. Siri had been badly shaken up and, as he drifted into a space between wakefulness and slumber, he began to relive the whole episode.

Initially, he felt guilty for not trying to help. Then he tried to convince himself that he didn't give a damn, whatever the outcome had been. But, after looking more closely into his feelings, he realised that he actually wanted the lion to have come out on top. Even the thought of the lion feasting on three, small mutilated bodies couldn't change his feelings when he considered the alternative outcome. The animal, after being abandoned, starved and injured, to be brought down by that homicidal trio. He admitted to himself that if he had intervened and followed his instincts, he would have most likely helped the lion.

Chapter XIV

MEDITERRANEAN MURDER – 2055

With the use of the bike, Siri made good progress as he continued his journey south along an abandoned auto-route. From time to time he saw some signs of habitation among the scattered abandoned buildings, especially distant fires in the night, and he also heard the occasional manmade sound or a dog barking but, at the end of each day, he was relieved not to have encountered another living soul face to face.

As he approached Orleans, the landscape to each side of the old A10 toll road was almost entirely made up of what had been agricultural land and, as he had hoped, the road bypassed the most heavily populated area of the city.

Before crossing the auto-route bridge over the River Loire, he dismounted and stood for a while on the north bank. It was very early morning and Siri gazed up at a crescent moon that could still be seen low in the blue sky reflecting the rising sun. His eyes swept down and took in the remainder of the scene ahead of him. The wide and dry yellow river bed was sporting some bushes and trees that were able to find moisture from below the dusty surface, and the bridge was almost entirely covered with vegetation that had climbed the supporting columns.

A suburb of Orleans sprawled around the river, and Siri returned to his bike to pedal on across the bridge and get clear of the city as quickly as possible before any local inhabitants were likely to be out and about their business. Although he couldn't be certain of hostilities, Siri's previous encounters made him unwilling to put it to the test.

The weather had become steadily hotter and dryer as his journey took him forever southward and the season moved into high summer. Even with Siri's racial attributes, he was beginning to find the heat uncomfortable, and the everlasting problem of finding clean water had become far worse as the soil became dryer and his distiller became less effective.

The remaining journey from Orleans to the first sight of the sea at Beziers was three hundred and eighty miles and, thanks to having acquired the bike, Siri completed the distance in less than three weeks. The days passed quickly enough within a now well-established routine. Any cooking was done during daylight to avoid the firelight being easily seen, and he slept through the heat of the day in whatever shade he could find within a short distance of the road.

Beziers was originally built more than six miles from the coast, but less than half of that distance now lay between it and the rising sea level. The whole region had been the home to numerous marinas, which were tucked away in the many sheltered inlets. These had sheltered hundreds of small craft, but the rising sea level had overwhelmed them along with much of the adjoining flat agricultural land.

Siri spent a few hours walking along the high water mark which was edged with storm driven beds of driftwood and litter, the remains of hundreds of timber buildings and small craft which were entangled in a web of and the ever present sea-plastic. Greatly disappointed, he abandoned any hope of finding a suitable vessel and returned to his bicycle. Fortunately, the coast road had been constructed on an embankment which had kept it from flooding, and Siri cycled on in a south-westerly direction, to the next coastal town.

After an unsuccessfully search at several towns, as he travelled ever southward, he pressed on until he had passed the Spanish boarder and arrived at the coastal town of Calella, thirty miles or so to the north east of Barcelona.

He stopped his bike on the elevated coast road, where it cut across the west end of the town and, from his vantage point, he could see along the water-line into the distance. The beach had long since been reclaimed by the rising sea level which had already destroyed any buildings that had been built along the shore-line. The abandoned buildings that remained clear of the rising high water mark were engulfed in sand that had also overwhelmed the roads, paths and gardens, but the buildings were mostly intact.

Protruding from below the water line, the ruins had been reduced to stumps of concrete, topped with twisted branches of tangled, rusted steel from the upper floors. They resembled a fashionable sculptor's interpretation of a row of monstrous dead flower arrangements that, a few decades earlier, might easily have won the British Turner Prize. Strwn among these ruins was what appeared at first sight to be random wreckage but, after further examination, Siri recognised the assorted shapes of abandoned sea-going craft of all sizes. The smaller ones were mostly heaped and smashed into drifts by the assiduous swell, but the larger ships, aground in deeper water, stood like graveyard sentinels. Together, the larger vessels formed a ragged line far along the seemingly endless sands, giving testament to the conflict between the Federal Republic of Europe and the unstoppable human flood across the Mediterranean from Africa.

For decades there had been a steady, passive migration of Europe from the South. The domestic population of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia had been migrating into Europe by land and across the Mediterranean in an attempt to escape poverty and disease. At first, the increase in population of Europe and expanding labour market and consumption was considered to be of benefit, and the multicultural society that it produced made the population less troublesome to control. But the benefits were quickly outweighed by the disadvantages wrought by failing public services and escalating food prices resulting from an ever increasing world population. However, migration from many African states had become imperative after their governments had fled, abandoning the urban populations to the chaos and depredations created by drought, starvation and crime in their cramped towns and cities. The steady flow of tens of thousands of migrants travelling North into the FRE had become a flood of tens of millions.

It was plain to see that, as with the previous towns to the north, there would be no serviceable craft to be found on the beach and Siri was ready to press on, but he was puzzled by what appeared to be the abundance of some sort of round squash-like vegetable rolling up and down the beach with the action of the waves. Curiosity

prompted him to leave the road and wander down to the beach to investigate, and it was only when he reached the high waterline that he could identify the mysterious objects, they were human skulls.

Differing in sizes, they rode up the beach upon the waves, only to return, joyfully, bouncing back into the breakers. A grim parody, Siri thought, of the sun blessed beach playground that this place used to be. The now familiar beds of multicoloured sea-plastic lay along the sand but, unlike the beaches further north, Siri could see human bones among the rubbish. He noticed a child's skull and the remains of a black doll entangled together, and he wondered if they had been together in life as well as in death.

Three years earlier, in 2052, assorted improvised landing craft and miscellaneous ships and boats of all sizes are continually arriving and disgorging irregular troops, young men and families along the north coast of the Mediterranean. At Calella beach, those that are not killed by the FRE troops who are defending the international border, find cover among the remains of ruined buildings along the beach, which is covered with the dead and dying.

A little out to sea, several helicopters are passing over the vessels that have yet to land. They are all delivering the same orders through loudspeakers to the occupants in three languages, Spanish, French and English.

'DO NOT ATTEMPT TO LAND YOUR CRAFT UNLESS YOU AND ALL OF YOUR PASSENGERS HAVE THE NECESSARY DOCUMENTATION CONFIRMING YOUR PERMISSION TO ENTER THE TERRITORIES OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF EUROPE. IF YOU ARE NOT IN POSSESSION OF THESE DOCUMENTS, YOU MUST RETURN TO THE TERRITORY OF YOUR EMBARKATION, AS YOU WILL NOT BE GRANTED ENTRY.'

The messages are being largely ignored, apart from the odd vessel which moves further along the beach in a vain attempt to avoid the fighting ahead. The occasional bullet ricochets against the helicopters' armour plated undersides.

Armed migrants eventually secure the beachhead but, in doing so, they have taken terrible losses from the defending forces. Machine gun and mortar positions, inland artillery and helicopter gunships are killing them almost as quickly as they arrive, but there are hundreds of thousands constantly arriving along the entire length of the visible coastline.

An Afro-European helicopter pilot, Saul, is one of the defending forces strafing the beach below. He has forward facing armaments and his crew are firing from gun positions on either side. The helicopter crews had been told that they would be defending their homeland against a mixture of violent illegals and armed terrorist extremists, and not the slaughter of harmless, unarmed civilians. He thought that he was well prepared to defend his country, especially as his wife had been horribly killed by a gang of migrants whilst looting his home, but it was achieving nothing and he hadn't expected to be ordered to fire upon women and children.

The young gunners are making excited whoops and shouts as they mow down the largely defenceless civilians below, with very little risk to themselves. Saul is extremely ill at ease, and his attention is caught up by the plight of a young woman running across his direction of travel. Her name is Stella and she is carrying a baby and a toddler in her arms. She stops as she sees the gunship bearing down on her and she is caught like a rabbit in oncoming headlights. Paralysed with fear, she can't move as she awaits death. She looks so helpless, and Saul's strict Catholic upbringing is so much at odds with what he has been ordered to do.

He turns the helicopter away, but one of his crew opens fire and hits Stella in the chest. Saul sees her fall with her babies in her arms and he is distraught, angry and frustrated at having failed to spare the woman. He wildly tips the helicopter in the hope of dislodging the vindictive side gunners; he always had to tell them to use the safety lines, but the cocky pups never did. The gunner on the down side clings to his fixed machine gun and is hanging out of the open door, but the elevated gunner is not so lucky and falls back through the gun deck. They collide and both fall to the beach.

The co-pilot immediately attempts to take control but, in anticipation, Saul has already drawn his sidearm and shoots him. Saul has completely lost his reason, or has he finally come to his senses? He can only feel the injustice of the situation, and he no longer cares for his own safety as he attacks and downs another helicopter that is strafing the civilians from the opposite direction. He ignores the shouting in his headset and casts it aside as he goes head to head against a second helicopter, but this time he is unlucky and his damaged helicopter careers into the sands below. It comes to rest against a concrete ruin and, as his life drains away, he has no regrets, as his faith assures him that he and his beloved wife will soon be reunited.

At the westerly end of Calella beach, Captain Miguel de Unamuno, a front line Spanish army officer, is watching the incident from a cliff-top position behind a barricade of sandbags. He is in command of a support company of heavy machine guns, mortars and two static anti tank guns. From their position they had been ordered to flank the incoming vessels and suppress movement across the beach into the Town. The action has sickened him and he would dearly love to abandon his position. The slaughtering of those below had been obscene as no ship, vehicle or personnel could hope to defend themselves from his weapons. But now his company is in danger of being overrun. He knows that a number of enemy troops have been working their way behind his position, and he has ordered his men to abandoned their heavy weapons and take up their small arms in order to defend themselves against the expected attack from the rear. He is desperately communicating with his superiors.

‘Yes Commander, we need reinforcements, or fall back and regroup. We need to -’

‘Listen to me, Captain, you are to hold your ground, do you hear me? I order you -’

There are a number of explosions from grenades thrown amongst his men, and the captain is killed instantly. A group of fighters armed with sub machine guns storm in through the dust and smoke and shoot the remaining stunned and wounded.

Back on the beach, in the midst of the explosions, Stella is curled up upon a bed of sea-plastic in the shelter of a small boat. The bullet from the helicopter gun-ship had passed through her baby and on into her chest, and she is bleeding to death. But in spite of having lost a great deal of blood, she still manages to clutch her dead baby and keep her terrified infant in the shelter of her arms who, in turn, is clutching a black baby doll. Amongst the gun fire and explosions, Stella softly sings a lullaby to the infant in an effort to calm her. As she sings, Stella's mind drifts back to her husband when they parted for the last time.

In their flat in Lagos, Nigeria, Stella was in tears at the bedside of her husband Kevin. Following the collapse of the Nigerian government, Kevin, who had been a civil servant, no longer had an income and was forced to find food for his family from wherever he could. He had been unlucky and had contracted Ebola from handling bush meat bought from the black market, and he was in a fever.

Kevin was bleeding from his nose, eyes and ears and nearing death. He tried to give a document to his wife.

'You must go without me, for the sake of the children. It is their only chance,' he reasoned.

Stella was too distraught to speak and simply shook her head and continued to weep as she bathed his brow with cold water. Kevin was barely able to speak but insisted.

'You must promise me. If you are not there in time they will leave without you.'

Stella still refused to agree, and simply continued to care for him. He managed to reach out and weakly grip her nearest arm, shaking her, feebly with what little strength he still had and he tried to shout, but he was barely audible.

'Promise me, for the children.'

She closed her eyes and wiped them with her fingers. Then, slowly nodding whilst sniffing back her tears, she took the document and he relaxed. The battle with his stubborn wife was over, but he was much weaker now. He pointed to a bedside draw and spoke again.

'Take it. You may need it.'

She pulled the draw open and took out a powerful hand-gun and a box of ammunition.

‘Now go, quickly,’ ordered Kevin.

Sobbing, she hugged and kissed him tenderly and then, without looking back, she slowly stood and left him for the last time.

Having done what little he could for his family, Kevin’s strength and resolution was gone and his thoughts turned to his own suffering. In great pain and knowing that he was soon to die, alone and without comfort, he wept dry tears for himself.

On the beach, Stella is still curled around her children. She gazes lovingly into her distraught daughter’s eyes as she smiles reassuringly while singing a lullaby. Then, holding the gun behind the infants head so that the shot will kill them both, she squeezes the trig...

As Siri suspected, there was nothing intact left along the beach adjacent to Calella, nothing that would float. And although he was greatly dispirited, he decided to search further west along the coast road in the hope of finding something seaworthy enough to cross the Mediterranean and set foot, once again, on African soil.

After cycling six miles to the south west of Calella, Siri found the village of Arenys del Mar. There, in the harbour area, he was again bitterly disappointed. Although the harbour walls and jetties had been built up several meters to combat the rising sea level, there was nothing to be found of any use and he was beginning to accept that it was likely to be the same story at all the other small ports spread along the south-westerly Spanish coast.

Siri had assumed there would be an abundance of vessels brought over and abandoned by the mass immigration from North Africa, and that finding a small sailing craft wouldn’t present a problem. But now, having seen the wreckage that remained on the beaches and the empty ports, he began to consider the alternatives. He could either continue south-west in the hope of finding a seaworthy craft, or travel overland around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and south, through the Middle East, in order to reach Africa. This would add a huge amount of extra mileage to his

journey, and he decided it was worth persevering through Spain. If the worst came to the worst, and no seaworthy craft could be found, he could attempt to travel across the now almost completed Mediterranean Dam. And, although the security there was likely to be impenetrable, he would have to cross that bridge, if and when he came to it.

After searching throughout the harbour workshops and boat sheds at Arenys del Mar, there appeared to be nothing there of any use, just abandoned tools and a few piles of materials. He was about to move on to the next port, around five miles further on, when it occurred to him that there just might be a suitable vessel *under* the water.

After searching along the deserted jetties, Siri was delighted to find the occasional taught mooring line running into deep water, but each discovery was followed by disappointment at finding that they were attached to larger power-boats. They could just be recognised in the murk, but it would have been impossible to move their dead weight and, without fuel, they would be useless. However, Siri's persistence was eventually rewarded when he found a small, clinker built open sailing boat with its gunwales just protruding above the surface. After roping it tightly against the jetty, he had it bailed to around the halfway mark before he saw water leaking in between the planks, but enough weight had been reduced to allow him to manoeuvre it to the workshop slipway.

The masts and spars were present and in good order, but the rigging was absent. It took two weeks from finding the craft and hauling it clear of the water, to the completion of the repairs and preparations needed to make it seaworthy. It was a traditional, eighteen foot long Mediterranean ketch, and it had needed recaulking but, thanks to the experience gained with his adopted father, Ralph, and with materials from the workshops, Siri managed to make a first class job of the repairs. Then, after he had rigged the boat from materials found in the boat sheds, and he had loaded a good supply of fresh water, some roots and strips of dried snake flesh, he was ready to go.

Siri launched the boat from the slipway at first light and rowed out of the sheltered harbour into open water, which was choppy with a stiff breeze from the south-west. His intended course was virtually due south where he hoped to find the Balearic Islands within one hundred and twenty miles.

To maintain his heading at an acute angle into the wind, Siri had to be constantly tacking, and it took two days and a night of constant wakefulness to reach the island of Mallorca. It was nearing dusk as he approached the north coast of the island, and he could see that the coast was very rough, mostly too inhospitable to attempt a landing with its pale grey cliffs interspersed with rocky shores. As with many of the islands in the Mediterranean, it looked like a creation afterthought made from leftover rubble but, here at least, the vegetation seemed to be thriving, it was surprisingly green. The higher temperatures and drought that had destroyed the agriculture and habitat of southern Europe just seemed to have petered out to reveal, by contrast, a paradise.

Siri was keen to land and take some rest from being thrown about by the choppy waters, but there was no sign of a suitable landing, a beach or river, nearby. Nearer the shore, in the shelter of some cliffs, the water was calmer. He lowered his anchor over the side, carefully judging a suitable length of chain, and collapsed, exhausted in the bottom of the gently rocking boat.

At first light he recovered his mooring and turned west, following the coast until he reached a bay where a trickle of water fell from a cliff-top, several hundred feet high, down to the sea. To either side of the waterfall there were several concrete columns which supported an undermined stratum of rock, preventing the likely collapse of the whole cliff. A number of buildings, above and quite close to the edge, overlooked the sea. They were part of a small town called Banyalbufar,

There was a small jetty to the left of the cliff, and Siri manoeuvred his boat toward it with the intention of landing, stretching his legs and, possibly, catching some fresh game. However, when he was within fifty yards of landing, he thought he saw movement behind the jetty wall. Then again, higher up the

pathway leading down to the jetty. Siri felt distinctly alarmed and decided to err on the side of caution. He turned the boat's heading to off shore in order to wait and see if there would be any developments.

He didn't have to wait very long. As soon as it became obvious to the watchers, who were waiting in ambush behind the jetty wall, that the boat was not coming closer, they came out of hiding. There were at least a dozen of them, Sub Saharan Africans that had been stranded upon the Balearics in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe. Some were wearing the ragged remains of camouflaged clothing, and all were either armed with makeshift bows or spears. They were not tall and slim like the majority of Siri's people but broader and more powerfully built, and Siri was instantly terrified.

While some waded out into the sea towards him, the others began to shoot arrows at him which were hitting the boat, and very few were falling into the sea. They intended to have his boat or him or both, either way, they obviously weren't particular about taking him alive.

Siri dove into the bottom of his boat to find cover and, pulling in the line to the outhaul, he caught an occasional soft breeze, and the boat started to make way at a snails pace, carrying him towards safety. The assailants, seeing him escape, were shouting in a tongue unknown to Siri. The waders, realising he was moving into deeper water, began their return to the jetty. Then, just as he thought he was safe, arrows began to fall from the sky, and one thudded into the bottom of the boat. The archers, deprived of a straight shot, had quickly run up the jetty path to gain greater range and were aiming high hoping to strike Siri from above. Most of the arrows were wide of their mark and fell into the water with a zipping sound, but occasionally one would impale itself into the timber of the boat.

Not before time, Siri's small craft managed to inch far enough from the shore to catch more wind and be out of range of the archers who, seeing their quarry escape, were howling with anger and arguing with each other until some fighting broke out.

After this encounter, Siri decided to keep a safe distance from the shore as he travelled in a westerly direction to pass the island. He noticed that the main sail had been cut by a falling arrow, and the tear would need sewing before it could cope with anything more than the prevailing light breeze. But he would need to land in order to be able to safely carry out the repairs. A dozen or more arrows still decorated his boat, and he managed to rig the tiller to self steer while he recovered the arrows that had struck into the wooden hull. The arrows had been made using green bamboo for the shafts, which had been straightened and sanded smooth. The flights were made of thin plastic sheet, cut to resemble feathers, and the points were made from thin sheet metal which had been cut into a triangular or thin diamond shape, and corrugated to give them strength. Without a bow, they were of no use to Siri, and he threw them into the prow.

He disabled the self steering rig and travelled on west for another ten miles or so until he reached Dragonera, a cliff-faced, small island just off the North West corner of Mallorca.

Theoretically it was uninhabited, but Siri wasn't taking any chances this time. Again he was faced with an inhospitable rocky coastline, but he found Cala Llado, a small natural harbour that looked deserted. Having found a likely looking place to land, he travelled down wind, well away from the shore to avoid attracting attention, before he lowered his sails and made the best of a meal of raw plant roots, dried raw snake and warm water as he waited until dusk.

Quietly returning in the starlight, Siri came to the shore and beached his craft to one side of the harbour. Immediately, he found his repair kit and began to repair the torn sail. Not the easiest of tasks in the available light, but he judged it to be far safer than daylight, and he was keen to leave these dangerous shores as quickly as possible. Having finished the repair, he slept upon the hard ground beside his craft and awoke just before dawn. Slipping as silently as possible back into the sea, he had barely completed raising his sails when he heard the sounds of shouting in the distance. He continued his preparations to make way in the hope of avoiding any trouble, but it quickly became obvious that the shouting was

coming nearer, and he began to row in attempt to catch a breeze as quickly as possible.

A heavy splash sounded from along the shore and, in the dawn light, he could just make out the ripples from something swimming toward him. At first he panicked, imagining it to be another attacker but, as it drew nearer he could just make out the head of an animal that was heading his way. He shipped an oar and waited with the other, raised, ready to strike, thinking that it might supply him with fresh meat. But, when it reached the side of the boat, he could see that it was just a dog.

As Siri lost interest and once more began to pull on the oars, the shouting restarted but very much nearer than before. It seemed that the noise spurred the dog to greater efforts and, after his last encounter, Siri had sympathy for any one, even a dog, who was stuck on these islands. He shipped his oars and the dog once more came along side and desperately attempted to scramble on board. It seemed to be friendly and harmless enough and Siri reached down, grabbed fistfuls of hair and hauled the saturated animal up and over the gunwale.

It laid in the bottom of the boat, exhausted, its eyes looking into Siri's as if it was attempting to communicate that it would be a good idea if he started rowing and, after a few more strokes with the oars, Siri was able to make way, heading south, in the mild breeze.

Although they were not in sight, the hunters, for Siri had no doubt that the dog was being hunted, could be heard shouting to one another for some time until he had made a good distance from the island. The dog was some sort of black Labrador cross, and Siri wondered how the hell he was going to feed both himself and a dog.

Leaving the Balearic Islands them, Siri and the new member of his crew set a south easterly course for Tunisia. Although the nearest African landing would have been due south, the steady south-westerly breeze would carry him the greater distance with less effort and in much the same time.

He decided to call the dog Akie, the name of the hunter-gatherer people that had lived alongside the Maasai in northern Tanzania. Once Akie had recovered from his ordeal, he slobbered

over Siri in gratitude before making his way to the prow, where he found the arrows and barked and growled uncontrollably at them. It was not until Siri had collected and thrown them over the side, that Akie stopped his excited barking and took his self appointed post, stock still, concentrating ahead as if expecting a rabbit to leap out of the ocean at any moment.

Siri had been unable to rest during the journey from the Spanish mainland to Mallorca, due to the need to continually change his tack, but with a light and favourable wind and a keen lookout, he felt able to assemble his self-steering rig again and get some sleep in the stern of the boat.

Siri and his wife Unica are enjoying a barbecue in their garden with their daughter, Marabilla, who is five years old, and their dog Penrod, a black Labrador. They live in a luxurious house provided by Siri's employer, Monsanto, in a small town called Luling just outside of New Orleans in Louisiana State, and only three miles from Siri's workplace. Siri has some rare time off from his work and they're enjoying some quality family time together.

Their plot backs on to a dry ditch and a parched area of dead trees and brush covered scrub and, for some reason, Penrod is barking and jumping up at the back fence. They call him but he is frantically attempting to get at an unseen quarry, and he succeeds in scrambling under the fence, barking madly as he disappears into the scrub.

A shot is heard, followed by complete silence. Siri quickly ushers his family into the house, opens his gun locker and presses a loaded automatic pistol into his wife's hands. Then, taking a twelve gauge shot gun, he returns to the backyard to investigate.

He finds Penrod's body in a dry gulley, but there was no sign of an intruder. He squats to lift Penrod but can still hear him barking, further off in the scrub. The barking grows louder as Siri pushes through the undergrowth toward the sound as branches brush across his face.

Siri opened his eye's and was confused as he looked up at the hairy underbelly of a dog. Akie had his paws on the starboard gunwale and was barking madly, for no apparent reason. Siri sat up and turned to see what he was so excited about and he saw, in the distance, two small clouds in the clear blue sky. He managed to calm Akie down as the mysterious shapes grew larger until, beneath the clouds, emerged a vessel approaching from the west. It was a huge wind powered, twin-hulled container ship. The prow of each hull was attached to a huge spinnaker sail. Behind these were two rows of vertical wings which rose from the upper deck, one above each hull, giving the impression of two warring square riggers.

For a while, Siri watched, fascinated at the sight of the oncoming vessel, until it dawned on him that it was heading directly towards his position. He turned his boat to a north-easterly heading to clear its path, but the vessel seemed to be tracking him. His little boat was already aquaplaning downwind as he desperately tried to escape its trajectory, but the massive twin hulls quickly overtook him and, as they passed to either side, the overhanging superstructure loomed above and smashed his rigging.

As his trapped and crippled little boat passed through the tunnel of the underside of the ship, he could see a platform positioned just above the height of the swell near the stern, spanning between the hulls. There were armed figures on the platform awaiting his arrival, and the leading edge of the platform had a row of rails sloping ahead, ploughing into the water. With a sickening lurch, the boat with Siri, Akie, his bike and all his equipment were scooped up and thrown against a barrier that preventing them from tipping back over into the sea.

Siri had been struck on the head and was briefly rendered unconscious during the collision and, when he came to, he was disorientated. However, he was sufficiently aware to realise that he was being directed at gunpoint to disembark. Akie, who was standing firm in the little craft, was maintaining an insane level of aggression towards the crew, and Siri, fearing that they might decide to shoot the dog, called and patted Akie, reassuringly, in an effort to calm him. Eventually, when no aggressive gestures had been

forthcoming from the crew, Akie had stopped his noise and had turned to Siri for approval. Unsteadily, Siri, with one hand firmly clutching the scruff of Akie's neck, had stepped on to the platform, as a crew-member lifted Siri's belongings out of the boat. All, that is, with the exception of the precious bike, which remained abandoned in the boat. The safety fence was hydraulically raised, and the loyal craft tipped back into the open sea, where it fell, upturned, and was left behind in the wake of the huge vessel.

The loss of both the boat and the bike angered Siri. With what right had he been taken from international waters, and his property destroyed? Not knowing the nationality of either the ship or the crew, he used all three languages known to him and demanded to see the captain. The crewmen smiled to one another at Siri's protestations, but they gave no indication that they had understood.

After Akie had been leashed to a length of rope, they were escorted to a cabin where the warrant officer, who was a US American, took details from Siri as to his name and origin excreta. After their welcome from the warrant officer, Siri and Akie were forcibly invited to the bridge, where they found themselves standing before the captain.

The bridge extended across the entire width of the ships beam giving a panoramic view ahead and along each side to the stern. The rear wall of the bridge was entirely covered with a complex viewing screen showing various external 3D images of the ship, both above and below water. They could be set in various modes, including infra red, to give all round viewing in all weather conditions. There were also various stations in the bridge for navigation and weapons control. This was a state of the art, twin hulled armed container ship manufactured from a polymer nanocomposite, and it was called the USS Alabama. Its task was to carry support to, and commodities from, outlying garrisons that secured overseas supplies for the US.

Siri was furious and ready to challenge the captain, but it had occurred to him that, if any suspicions were raised about his identity or legal status, it would only take a moment to identify him and obtain a readout of all of his personal details.

The captain was sitting, reclined in the command chair, holding a cigar in one hand and a battered looking PA-pad in the other. Two armed members of the crew stood behind Siri, just out of range of Akie's lead. Middle-aged and with a shock of red hair, which matched his temperament, the captain was not famed for being conventional in his dealings with unofficial travellers, especially when dealing with pirates. He very nearly ordered both the man and dog thrown overboard on sight, but... both the man and dog radiated a certain something, pride was it? No, they were outraged, indignant, that was it. Not the typical state of mind for captured pirates. The captain was used to picking up the cringing crews of Mediterranean pirate vessels but this was no pirate, of this the captain was sure.

'Firstly, let me introduce myself. I'm Captain Joe Dragon and you are aboard my ship which is the USS Alabama, a military transport ship, one of many of its kind. Now, let's see who you are.'

The captain raised his pad and, flicking his eyes across the screen, examined a few pages of a hidden document. Siri tried to appear calm but if the captain were to allow his PA to run a routine DNA check on him, all would be up and he would be in the brig until the Alabama returned home to the US.

'You have claimed that you are a Mr. David Summers, and that you were teaching English in a French elementary school before being abandoned by the authorities.' The captain looked up at Siri.

'Quite frankly, standing there wrapped in a red blanket, you don't look much like a Mr. David Summers.'

The captain, wearing a cynical smile, lowered his device whilst waiting for a response and, when no reply was forthcoming, he tried again, a little wearily this time.

'Mr. Summers, if that is your name, let me explain exactly what is happening here. I am deciding whether to have you thrown over the side as a pirate, which I am authorised to do if I consider your presence to be a danger to my vessel or its crew.'

He briefly waited for a response and Siri finally broke his silence.

‘I assume, Captain, that this fine vessel of yours is also equipped with a plank?’

‘A sense of humour in the face of adversity - very good Mr. Summers,’ the captain chuckled, ‘But I assure you that these arrangements, in these desperate times, are very flexible and subject to my interpretation.’

He grinned at Siri but there was still no further response.

‘I really do not have the time to play games, and I have no intention of obtaining a readout on you, although that is the required procedure which, incidentally, would instantly notify my superiors of your identity and whereabouts. Therefore, it seems that I have no other choice, unless there is some skill that you may have that can justify me *not* returning you from whence you came?’

The captain again waited for a reaction before continuing.

‘At this moment, any help you may be able to provide in reaching this decision would be most useful.’

Siri, having calmed down, had realised that although the captain was not quite as menacing as he made out he was, never the less, deadly serious. Siri co-operated.

‘How about you give me a clue captain?’

The captain registered to Siri’s impeccable English accent, and mimicked him.

‘Give you a clue? Righty-ho then, here’s a clue for you!’ Then, returning to his native US drawl, he continued, ‘If you can scrub decks or, maybe, administer medical assistance you can stay, for the time being. Are you a doctor Mr. Summers? We *do* have a doctor on board but he’s generally inebriated on something or other and has become a liability.’

Siri couldn’t resist taking advantage of this opportunity to impress the captain.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘not a medical doctor but, by the sound of it, I dare say I’d be of some use.’

‘Really? What sort of doctor are you then, Mr. Summers?’

Again, Siri couldn’t help himself, standing there with the appearance of an illiterate native.

‘Environmental and Biological Sciences, among others!’

‘Very impressive, Doctor,’ the captain almost jeered.

‘Professor, actually,’ Siri raised the game.

‘Professor, quite a rare individual in these times I would say.’

Too late, Siri realized his mistake and panic briefly flickered across his face, which didn’t go unnoticed by the captain.

‘Very well, *Professor Summers*, but lets get one thing understood here. I don’t give a rat’s ass *who* you are provided that you’re *what* you say you are. You can stay aboard but you’ll be expected to pull your weight. If you’re of no use, I’ll consider you to be a threat to my vessel and have you put overboard. Understood?’

‘Understood, Captain!’

‘And, for the time being, the two men behind you will be overseeing you in your duties, which will be twenty-four-seven?’

Siri gave a brief nod and the captain continued, ‘I can’t risk you having buddies out there waiting to be given a signal to board us, can I?’ The captain looked Siri up and down in disbelief, ‘No matter how unlikely I think the possibility of you being the vanguard of a pirate gang.’

He returned his attention to the pad, ignoring Siri for a moment, and then glanced back.

‘You still here Summers? Dismissed. Be about your duties, report to the officer on deck!’

Siri remained and asked, ‘Captain?’

‘Yes, Summers?’ the captain said wearily.

‘One thing, Captain, where are we heading?’

‘Alexandria, well, what’s left of it! We have a consignment of armoured vehicles to deliver to the regional commander with our usual return load of agricultural produce to the states. Anything else you want to know?’

Siri barely stifled a broad smile.

‘What are you looking so pleased about, Summers? Dismissed, and get yourself kitted out in something more suitable than a blanket, will you, or the crew will think you’re some sort of damned witchdoctor.’

It only took the Alabama four days to reach Alexandria on the Egyptian coast but, during that time, Siri was constantly kept at

work in the medical centre. It seemed that every member of the twenty or so crew had a medical problem that the official doctor had either failed to attend to, or the crew member had had no confidence in him and hadn't thought it worthwhile to report the matter. Akie also proved his worth during the voyage. He had settled in with the crew very quickly and had taken to sleeping on the top deck.

During the small hours of their second night on-board, as they were passing near a small Gehenna of an island called Lampedusa, the officer on watch had failed to spot two small craft delivering armed boarders to the stern of the ship.

As Akie lay on the top deck, it had only been the slightest hint of their scent that had disturbed his slumber. He rose and trotted into the breeze towards the stern and, with his head pushed through the safety railings, he sampled the air. It was there again, stronger and unmistakable. Akie became an embodiment of aggression, a veritable Fenris Wolf, as he burst into a violent bout of snarling and barking. His lips were fully retracted exposing his white fangs, and his saliva flared in the moonlight.

If it hadn't have been for Akie's alertness and excited barking, the ship could easily have been overrun by a boarding party of Barbary pirates, and the survival of the crew would have been unlikely. These pirates were a constant threat to shipping throughout the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. They were constantly on the move between conveniently placed islands and remote coastal inlets, which served as temporary bases for their operations and made their eradication impracticable. As it was, thanks to Akie's vigilance and warning, they were located on the monitors whilst climbing the rear superstructure, and armed crewmen were able to repel them before they could complete the forty-foot climb up to the first access point. The surviving members of the boarding party were picked up by their power-boats, which turned to make their escape. However, on the orders of Captain Joe Dragon, they were both sunk by a deck gun, thus ensuring that their crew was drowned. The captain's logic had been simple, drowned, they wouldn't be troubling the Alabama, or any other vessels, again.

After this encounter, the captain made a great fuss of Akie; however, the crew-member that was on watch at the time of the attempted boarding was not seen by Siri again. He preferred to imagine that the guilty crewmember was simply being confined to quarters, or being held in the brig for a while, and not weighted down with a length of anchor chain on the sea floor. With his lack of regard for convention, there was definitely something about Captain Joe Dragon that put Siri in mind of a lawless, swash-buckling privateer from another age.

When the Alabama moved within sight of North Africa, massive industrial solar generating plants could be seen almost continually along the coast. They were using fields of mirrors that concentrated the sun's heat to produce steam to power electricity generating turbines. The installations were unmanned and defended by an automatic system which incorporated a multitude of weaponry. Static observation and assault satellites watched from above and, on the one occasion when the system had been attacked, the whole defence network had successfully defended itself without any human assistance.

An acrid smell of rotting fish was getting stronger as they travelled east, and Siri noticed that the sea around the ship was becoming red with an algal bloom. He guessed that the algae must be the cause of the stink and, during the last few miles of the approach to Alexandria, it grew worse and began to make his nose sting. As they made their final approach into the harbour, he could see a floating boom that had been constructed around the harbour entrance in an attempt to exclude the worst of the floating red scum, but with limited success.

The rising mean sea level had initially been combated with the raising of walls and sea defences around the docks but, at some point, the attempt to protect the coastline had been abandoned and the harbour facilities had been raised on concrete pillars, leaving the surrounding flooded metropolis crumbling into the saltwater. After the completion of the Atlantropa Dam, it was hoped that the original sea level could be restored, or even lowered well beyond its original level.

They passed several obsolete Cloud Ships which were moored up alongside some of the abandoned wharfs, their masts and hulls battered from the many tens of thousands of nautical miles covered during their years in service. They were survivors of a huge fleet of automated crafts that had dispersed droplets of water into the atmosphere in an attempt to generate clouds and effect a cooling of the planet, but the project had been quickly abandoned.

A number of ground defence armaments were also evident in the area, including a battery of laser supplemented ground to air auto-cannons, which were spaced along the docks; someone was taking the defence of the docks very seriously.

The Alabama was secured to the harbour adjacent to a number of barges loaded with containers, and sections of the top deck slid back to reveal a pair of huge telescopic crane jibs which were extended out over the nearest barge. While the containers were being self loaded into the Alabama's hold, military vehicles were exiting from the rear of each hull down ramps to the dock below.

Siri made his way to the bridge to see the captain where, he suspected, he would also find Akie. As he entered, there were several crew-members on the bridge in discussion with the first officer. Captain Joe Dragon was in his chair throwing tit-bits to Akie who was sitting up on his haunches, his paws held up begging. The animal has no pride, Siri thought to himself.

The captain looked up as Siri approached and addressed him.

'Yes, Professor Summers, what can I do for you?'

'With your permission, and assistance Captain, I would like to leave with the military convoy today, they are heading my way.'

'I suspected as much. You've done well here Professor in very little time, and I for one will be sorry to see you go. How can I persuade you to stay with us?'

'I appreciate your comments Captain, but I'll have to decline.'

At this refusal, the captain became uncomfortably serious and said.

'What if I threatened to hand you over to the authorities, *Professor David Summers?*'

Siri was shocked by the threat and the captain's sudden change of mood and he tried to bluff it out.

'Why do you think they would have any interest in me Captain?' he said uncertainly, not even convincing himself.

'How many people do you think there are with your qualifications, Professor? Let alone a Maasai with the name of David Summers?' Siri opened his mouth to reply but the captain continued.

'I'll tell you - none! But there is a Professor answering your description missing and wanted from a high level government department back in the States.'

Siri stood still without any attempt to speak. He became stubbornly silent.

'Mm, it was worth a try,' said the captain. 'Go Professor, and take care. If you should ever change your mind, let me know and there'll be a berth waiting for you.'

Siri was a feeling shaken, but the captain was once again affable in his manor and Siri tried to relax.

'Thank you Captain, I think,' he said.

'You're dismissed sailor. On your way, and see the warrant officer to collect the personal possessions that were taken from you on your arrival. Oh yes - and your wages.'

'Wages?' said Siri, a little bewildered.

'Yes Professor, wages. Do you think this is a slaver? Now, get off my bridge, I've wasted enough time on you already.'

'Thank you, again Captain.'

As Siri turned to leave the bridge, he called Akie but the dog remained seated beside the captain. Siri called him again, but he simply wagged his tail and didn't move.

'Don't worry Professor, he'll be fine here. I suspect you may have quite a journey ahead of you, and finding food for two mouths might not be so easy.'

Siri walked over to the dog and made a fuss of him for the last time, and Akie excitedly jumped up to lick Siri's face, maybe to show there were no hard feelings.

After Siri had gone, the first officer came over to the captain and asked, 'Are you sure that was the right decision, Captain?'

'I don't know why they want him, but let me ask you a question, Number One.' The captain looked at his pad, 'If you were in serious trouble and needed help from someone that you could rely on, who would you choose: The men in black, or our doctor, Professor Sironka Miterienanka Masters?'

Without hesitation the first officer said, 'Why, you of course Captain!'

'Are you being insolent Number One?'

'Point taken, Captain.'

'The government can do its own dirty work.'

Chapter XV

DELTA

The convoy of newly delivered military vehicles travelled along the Alexandria to Cairo desert road which was within a few hundred yards of the outer perimeter security fence. It encircled the entire Nile delta and was well defended against ground forces by a minefield followed by concrete tank traps, a ditch and an embankment with sandbagged depressions marking gun positions set behind a scramble of razor wire.

Through the cloud of dust created by the vehicles, Siri could see that the surrounding land was mostly cultivated but, where the land wasn't being irrigated, it was baked bone-dry mud and desert sand.

Within four hours the convoy was approaching their destination to the east of Cairo and, as they passed through the town, deserted districts of small and abandoned flat-roofed domestic buildings lay to either side. It had been well known that a programme of depopulation had been adopted in the Nile Delta region which had led to a ferocious war with the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Egyptian Government, backed by US and French forces, had finally secured the delta, only the population that were trusted had been retained within the secured Delta region, the rest had been expelled to find their own salvation and, unsurprisingly, many had joined the brotherhood in their fight against the occupation of North Africa by Western forces.

The vehicle leading the convoy drew up to a gated fence across the dusty entrance to what had been Al Maza Airport, but was now the control centre of the Delta defences. There were armed guards at the gate and towers stood at intervals around the perimeter of the airfield. As the convoy came to a halt, a guard in a UN uniform walked up to the driver and spoke in French.

'Identifications please?'

'Aw come on Pierre, do you have to be so dammed... annoying?' complained the driver.

The guard repeated his request.

‘Identification please, Sir?’

The driver and the officer beside him were hot and irritable as they handed over their papers.

‘You know I don’t speak French, and you can speak English as well as I can,’ complained the driver once more.

Smiling, the guard examined the papers and returned them before he replied in annoyingly perfect antiquated English.

‘There’s no need to loose your rag old man.’ Then, addressing the officer, he said, ‘I hear you have a passenger Sir, a Professor Summers? The commander wants to see him!’

‘He’s in the next vehicle. I’ll see that he’s delivered safely,’ the officer assured him, but he was plainly frustrated by the guard’s arrogance.

‘See that you do that - Sir!’ Then he addressed the driver again.

‘And try not to take a wrong turning to the vehicle pound this time. We had a hell of a job backing up twenty two tanks the last time you two delivery boys were allowed out to play.’

The other guards laughed, and the driver had become so annoyed and flustered that he crashed the gears in his haste to leave the sarcastic Frenchman, who shouted over the engine noise, ‘Don’t break it old man, it’s only just been delivered.’

The convoy finally passed through the gates into the Delta military base and headed off to an assembly area; however, the vehicle carrying Siri turned away to a secure compound where he was escorted into a building by two French military guards.

He was ordered to stand to one side of a countertop as his belongings were tipped out of his backpack. To the opposite side stood the depot’s Quartermaster, a tall, rugged looking middle-aged man who was noting down the items in silence. The Quartermaster’s eyebrows rose as he examined the shot gun, but rose further when he came to the spears and saw that one was heavily stained with blood.

‘Been hunting, have we sir?’ he said, as he stuffed the items into a large canvas bag with the spears sticking out by several feet. It was obvious that no reply was expected, a military thing that Siri was getting used to. The Quartermaster handed over a piece of paper

to Siri and told him, 'Keep that, you'll need it later, that is, if you're allowed to leave here as a free man!' He then issued Siri with a pile of desert fatigues before turning his attention to some documents that lay in front of him.

Siri remained standing, waiting for the next witticism, and he wasn't disappointed. The Quartermaster eventually looked up and, feigning surprise he said, 'You still here? Run along now with your two little friends, they'll show you what to do.'

The next stop was a wash-house with a changing area of lockers and a row of shower nozzles along one wall. A lightly built operative of medium height and indeterminate gender was waiting for them. It was wearing waterproof fatigues complete with a full face mask and, when Siri was ordered to strip naked and move over to the showers, it was evident from the voice that it was very likely a woman.

The lack of privacy didn't concern Siri, and the promise of a cold shower to slough away the sweat and grime of the desert was welcome. What he didn't count on was being hosed down with poison by a vindictive misandrist, as he later described the experience. Instead of Siri being allowed to use one of the regular showers, she used a one-inch bore fire hose with an attached smaller tube that introduced disinfectant into the stream, and it hurt. Not just because of the high water pressure battering his body, but it was also dammed cold. Siri's guard seemed to think the whole procedure was hilarious and he openly laughed throughout the ordeal.

'Keep your mouth shut,' ordered the woman in French. 'You don't want to swallow any of this, unless you want to puke to death,' she shouted.

As the water punched into Siri's body, she seemed to take great pleasure in ensuring that Siri was spotless, especially below the waist and, just when he thought his skin would be stripped away, the torture abruptly stopped.

He dressed in the fatigues supplied by the Quartermaster and, as he was being accompanied by the two guards to the next stop, Siri asked them in French, 'What's so funny about my hosing down, it bloody-well hurt?'

One of them replied, ‘As far as we can tell, the woman hates men and seems to have the opinion that testosterone should be declared an illegal substance, and anyone found being in possession should be severely chastised.’

The guard continued to explain that they had all suffered the same treatment, as it was standard procedure for all newcomers, and he swore that the woman played her hose on male genitals in the hope that they could be cleaned away.

The other guard disagreed.

‘Na, she just likes to shrink your cock down to size to humiliate you. That’s why she deliberately uses water from the cooler when she should be using water from the ambient tank.’

They next visited the base doctor and, after the usual urine and blood samples were taken and Siri had dutifully turned his head and coughed, he found himself escorted into a large second floor office-cum-living-room. It was furnished with luxurious quilted leather seating and a large desk near a wide window overlooked the airfield. Siri’s convoy of military vehicles could be seen below, parked in a square just outside the building, and several vertical take off and landing x planes were arranged along the airfield.

A huge overweight man who was a little older than Siri and dressed in a US naval uniform, rushed across the room to greet him with his arms outstretched.

‘My God, it *is* you. Long time no see, buddy-boy,’ he joyfully exclaimed as he clasped both of Siri’s hands and shook them vigorously. Siri was a little mystified as he didn’t recognize the officer, who continued, ‘You don’t remember me? It’s Hatch!’

Siri’s face broke out into a broad smile as he remembered this now, overweight, bald officer as the young and very fit Hatch from Oxford. As he held both of Siri’s hands, Siri clutched at his and dared to believe that he had, for the time being at any rate, found someone he could trust; a safe haven.

‘Hatch, it’s damn good to see you but what brought you out here?’ said Siri.

‘Later,’ said Hatch, ‘I’ll give you the grand tour and we can catch up. But look at you, you old spear chucker, not an ounce of fat

on you, you lucky bastard, not like me,' as he looked down at his belly.

Siri had to smile at his old friends mannerisms and replied, 'As politically correct as hamburgers served at a bar mitzvah. You haven't changed that much Hatch.'

'I do my best y'know,' Hatch replied, and they both laughed as if they were back in university together.

Hatch let go of Siri's hands and gestured to large and very comfortable looking leather chair.

'Grab a seat Siri you look all in,' he said, and Siri gratefully collapsed into it, exhausted, as Hatch turned to the open door and shouted.

'SERGEANT?'

Regimental Sergeant Major Bacon appeared at the open door and faced Hatch at attention.

'SIR?' he said in English, but with a heavy French accent.

'Relax, Sergeant, and please ask the canteen to find something for our honoured guest to eat, and something to drink?' Hatch looked enquiringly at Siri who nodded.

'I think you better make it ice water for now Sergeant, and make it pronto will you?'

'Yes, Sir,' said the Sergeant and saluted before he turned smartly and left the room.

Hatch made himself comfortable in a large easy chair opposite Siri.

'These French guys are bloody good but strictly to the book. Foreign Legion!' said Hatch. 'The whole regiment is here, or what's left of them that is. We've taken quite a few beatings holding this place, I can tell you.'

'I could see that you have some serious fortifications here,' said Siri, 'But, Hatch, what brought you out here? Not exactly Navy territory, is it!'

The Sergeant returned with a large glass jug of clear water with ice and sliced lemon and lime, and poured out two servings into crystal glasses on the desk. Hatch jumped up.

'OK Sergeant, that'll be fine,' and he took a glass over to Siri.

The Sergeant enquired, ‘Your inspection tour Sir. Will you still be making the rounds today?’

‘No Sergeant!’ replied Hatch, ‘Let’s make it the usual time, but tomorrow, shall we? And we’ll be making room in the Scout for our guest.’

‘Yes, Sir!’

Hatch gave the Sergeant a friendly nod as he briskly marched out and closed the door.

Hatch commented to Siri, ‘I wish he could be a little more relaxed when he’s away from his men,’ and wandered over to the window and stared across the airfield, unfocused, as his mind drifted, reliving the past.

‘I shouldn’t complain though, his discipline has held the remnants of his regiment together more than once in the face of the enemy. By rights the man should be a Major. Virtually all the core’s senior officers are dead or mad, and Bacon seems to have unofficially become the nanny over the younger Company Captains; meritocracy in the military, strange times!’

‘You mentioned a Scout?’ said Siri, ‘And, how come you were expecting me?’

Hatch snapped out of his melancholy and turned back toward Siri.

‘Er... Oh yes, that’s’ thanks to Captain Carrot, or Captain Dragon, to use his correct name. We call him, Carrot, because of his hair, and he fancies himself too much as the scourge of the sea, so we make fun of him, just a little, no harm meant.’

‘From what I’ve witnessed he deserves to be taken seriously enough, and there are near on a dozen pirates at the bottom of the Med to back me up,’ said Siri.

‘Yes, I heard about your pirates,’ said Hatch, ‘They got the usual treatment. But I hear your dog saved what could have been a nasty situation, and don’t get me wrong, I know only too well what the Captain is capable of, but we can’t let him take himself too seriously and get away with it.’

‘I see,’ said Siri, ‘And the Scout?’

‘Ah yes,’ said Hatch and pointed out of the window to the Vtol x planes, ‘As you can see, we have a number of X-planes, but I’ve managed to keep one beaten up old AAS 72x in the air. That’s Armed Aerial Scout. They’re old, but they’re pretty good. You can fly with the doors open and they have much better visibility than the current plastic x-planes that rely too much on cameras. You would enjoy the ride; the air is cooler and a lot cleaner with a bit of altitude.’

‘Yes, I’d like to see this place from the air,’ said Siri.

A knock, and Sergeant Bacon reappeared through the opened door again with Siri’s food. Hatch waved him on and he placed a large tray, with an assortment of breads, cold meats and fruit, on the desk. Siri jumped up and helped himself.

‘Will there be anything else, Sir?’ asked the Sergeant.

‘Thank you Sergeant, that will be all,’ said Hatch, to which Siri added his thanks.

‘So, what happened to change things?’ Hatch asked, ‘I heard you had it made; one of the chosen few with a safe future ahead of you, and all the rumours about immortality for the chosen few?’

‘I guess I couldn’t deal with all the bullshit any more, and the constant battle to persuade people in power to do the right thing. The kind of people who act on a hunch if they stand to benefit, who are completely deaf and blind to any proposition that threatens their own self interest, and yet demand watertight evidence before they will even listen to a proposition for the common good.’

Hatch looked unsure and asked, ‘Yeah, but that’s politicians, and you didn’t have to work with them; you were buried in the academic world, right?’

‘Not all the time, anyway, who said I was talking about politicians?’ Siri replied, ‘At least you know where you are with politicians, they are simply professional liars! No, in the academic world you *expect* people with a paragraph of letters after their name to have some integrity, but everyone has a price. Fuck’em!’

Hatch laughed until tears ran down his face, and when he finally recovered, he said,

‘Well, you always were a bit of a misfit with the academic priesthood in Oxford. I remember you used to wind them up by saying, “Insight is for he-men - experimentation is for cissies!” I’ve missed you, buddy and it’s great to see you again.’

‘And you have no idea how good it is to be here with you, trust me, it is *so* good.’

Hatch became serious and said, ‘While you’re here, in fact from now on, keep the name, what was it you called yourself on the Alabama?’

‘David Summers,’ Siri replied.

‘Yeah, well, stick to that name from now on if I were you. In fact, for the sake of a long and healthy life, it might be good if Professor Sironka Masters had the misfortune of an untimely death. Think about it!’

Siri nodded an acknowledgement of Hatch’s suggestion, and the two just sat and relaxed in each other’s company for a while, enjoying the moment.

‘So,’ began Hatch, ‘what brings you to these parts? Not sight-seeing I assume, although we have some wonderful old stuff here, tombs and such.’

‘No!’ answered Siri, ‘I just wanted out, that’s all. I just wanted to spend my last days where I belong with my family, if they’re okay and where I left them. Maybe I realised what was really important in life, to be with people that I love and who love me.’

Hatch looked as if he has been slapped, and he looked down at his shoes and made no comment.

Siri realised that he had touched a nerve and regretted his talk of love, but he remained silent until Hatch was ready to continue with the conversation.

After a few moments, Hatch looked up and there was moisture in his eyes, but not from merriment.

‘Sorry,’ he said at last, ‘I didn’t expect that. You caught me by surprise. I should be better prepared when asking personal questions, in case I might not like what comes up.’

‘No,’ said Siri, ‘I’m the one that should be sorry, I should have realised that you must have lost loved ones in the hell of recent years.’

Hatch just dumbly nodded in agreement, and Siri could see how the years of responsibility had taken their toll on this once carefree, fun-loving giant of a man who now looked old and very vulnerable.

‘No, you’re okay, Siri. I honestly thought I had gotten it all under control but obviously I haven’t. I’m glad it was you, it wouldn’t have done to have become emotional in front of my men.’

‘You want to talk about it?’ asked Siri.

‘No! Loosing people you love is no big deal anymore. Everyone has suffered.’

Hatch brightened up a little as he recounted their time at university.

‘I remember how we all thought you were a bit heartless at times when people were injured, sick or had just died. I understand now. Apart from you, we were all so insulated from reality, wrapped up in cotton wool so that we couldn’t get hurt. Health and safety, seatbelts and crash helmets, health warnings on unhealthy foods; we lived in a world where no-one was allowed to take risks, and people didn’t expect to have to look out for themselves.

‘Well, by Christ, *that* changed soon enough. After recent events, how *pathetic* it all seems now. While we were busy fitting handrails, we failed to prevent the *bloody ship* from sinking.’

In an expansive change of mood, Hatch dismissively swept his arm away from him and said,

‘Whatever!’ The past is past and right now we’re responsible for defending the Delta and the Suez Canal and keeping them operative. You’ll be able to see more clearly first thing tomorrow morning from the air. How about a *decent* drink?

‘Love one!’

Hatch broke open a new bottle of bourbon and poured a generous measure over two tumblers of ice.

‘Bottoms up,’ he said, and raised his glass, and Siri did likewise.

After a few moments, slouched back in their ample chairs, savouring the alcohol, Siri observed, 'I couldn't help noticing how ancient most of your defences are, it's like a scene from world war two out there. And tanks, who uses armoured vehicles any more? I thought everything was satellite controlled airborne remotes these days.'

Hatch smiled at his friend's observation.

'You're right, and we have some. But think about it for a moment. The territory from the Suez through the Delta right across the North African coast was secured by the US at the request, with no doubt some arm twisting and bribes, of the various governments of the time who were losing control to the fundamentalists. Naturally, the Islamic Brotherhood and their allies weren't very keen. They attempted to concentrate their attacks on various key targets, but they were repeatedly defeated and dispersed by US aerial drones, followed up with ground forces.

'But, having secured the territory, we have reached a kind of voluntary stalemate. They don't want to provoke a renewed round of hi-tech reprisals, and sophisticated weaponry doesn't really help against suicide bombers and IDEs. What we need is good old-fashioned fencing and minefields, all coordinated by an automated control network providing visual and statistical information. The system can detect, deploy and coordinate automatically without any human command decisions which make for a formidable defence system. We watch them, but we don't hunt them down with remotes and, generally, they don't snipe at us.

'In the mean time, any obsolete weaponry seems to find its way down here. We have far more than we can use, so we bury any irreparable vehicles in the sand at key points. These are used as; artillery, to prevent camping; anti tank, to take out any approaching unauthorised vehicles, and; machine gun positions, that second as manned observation posts. It does the job, and things seem to be settling down, provided of course that an additional major power doesn't decide to join in.'

The two friends continued drinking bourbon well into the night, and their increasingly inebriated conversation covered a lot of

ground that had occurred during the intervening years. It turned out that Hatch was single but he had been married three times, each a worse disaster than the previous one, and with no children to show for it. His personal tragedy, which was the cause of him becoming emotional, was that his Somali lover, and their young son, were both killed on the base by a rocket attack less than two years ago.

Hatch had been divorced by his third wife, and it had left him barely able to function. Sergeant Bacon had covered for him, but he was getting perilously close to a breakdown, when he developed a relationship with his civilian orderly, a poorly educated cleaner much younger than Hatch. She had fallen in love with this gentle giant in his loneliness, and he had fallen under the charm of her kind and caring nature. They had quickly become a devoted couple, and some treasured photographs showed that she had also been a very attractive lady. Understanding his friend's loss, Siri felt his friendship with Hatch grow stronger, and he found himself speculating on the possibility of settling in the delta, but he was set on completing his journey to the Maasai Mara.

The following morning, at first light, Hatch and Siri were together in the Scout helicopter at an altitude of only a few hundred feet. They were inspecting the perimeter fence that encircled the entire delta. Siri was sitting in the rear seats, facing the direction of travel, while Hatch knelt behind the two pilots. Although inaudible to Siri above the engine noise, Hatch was talking with them continually through his headphones, occasionally pointing to a navigation display or at various details on the ground.

As they travelled around the protected delta area, Siri could see that the entire perimeter was defended by the same system of minefield, tank traps, fence etc. From time to time he could see various rusted hulks and other signs of wreckage in the desert outside the defences, possibly the remains from previous conflicts. Crossing the various navigable tributaries and canals along the encroaching Mediterranean, heavy artillery positions, the turrets of buried tanks and anti aircraft positions could be seen to either side of each inlet. As a further precaution, most of the entrances to the Nile

had been obstructed with hulks and debris to hamper any vessels attempting to use the waterways.

A string of pontoons had been moored across the main navigable entrance to the Nile, and Hatch broke from his conversation with the crew to shout an explanation to Siri.

‘There’s enough explosive in those pontoons to destroy anything afloat, and the bastards out there know it.’

A few thousand yards or so upstream, Hatch’s squadron of three US destroyers and one mine sweeper lay moored amongst a plethora of smaller naval craft. One of the destroyers was the first stealth craft commissioned in the US, the USS Zumwalt. It was in shallow water and silted into its mooring.

Hatch leaned back again and shouted, ‘We’re occasionally called out to patrol the Med and the approaches to the Suez Canal to ensure that there’re no mines, but it hasn’t happened for a while. We’ve had to use the destroyers for backup along the coast as far as Tunisia a couple of times, but things seem to have quietened down for the time-being. Just as well, as the Zumwalt was sabotaged with explosives last year where she lay and we’re expecting a tow ship from the States some time soon to take her home for repairs.’

Siri could see that the destroyers had seen action and that the Zumwalt had sustained substantial damage on her port side. The sloping superstructure had a huge hole blown out from an internal explosion and, through the ragged edges of the broken hull, the badly damaged interior could be seen.

After passing over the Suez Canal they headed south, following the perimeter down the eastern side of the Delta, until they reached the now militarised Cairo Airport where Siri could see a mismatched selection of seemingly abandoned civilian aircraft. A few miles later, they crossed the Nile at the most southerly point of the Delta, but the perimeter fences continued southward into the distance to each side of a ten mile wide corridor containing the Nile.

Everywhere Siri had looked during the inspection, he could see military hardware of all types, sizes and age that had been brought into service

Hatch leant over to Siri again and shouted, ‘This is where the inspection ends. From Giza southward to the Aswan Dam, the Nile is the sole responsibility of the US Army which is dug in at Aswan. From then on, most of East Africa is under the control of various Islamic regimes, and China dominates much of sub-Saharan Africa further west.’

The pilot turned the chopper away to return north to their base.

Chapter XVI

SINO SUDAN

After Siri had spent a few days in the delta, Hatch had reluctantly arranged for him to join a routine flight in a twin engine Chinese cargo plane to Khartoum, a Chinese outpost. Hatch was evasive when asked what was being transported, and Siri didn't press the matter, but he suspected that it was some unofficial trading between the communities at the expense of their respective governments, more commonly referred to as the black market.

Hatch was disappointed at losing the company of his old university friend and, after Siri had collected his belongings from the Quartermaster with Sergeant Bacon, Hatch slung the webbing of an olive drab canvas bag over Siri's head and said, 'Take care of yourself without me, old friend, but maybe this will be of some use to you on your journey.'

Siri began to ask what was in it, but a cautious expression from Hatch cut short his enquiry. Instead, he simply thanked Hatch profusely, even though he thought it weighed far too much to be worth the effort of carrying it, whatever it contained. They walked the short distance from Hatch's quarters to the plane and said their final goodbyes, and Hatch returned to his duties of holding the delta on behalf of the US and its allies.

Siri sat in a row of seats which backed onto the cockpit of a twin-engine, turboprop bush plane. He was facing a cargo of bags and packages which filled the body of the stripped out seating area which was separated by a gated, heavy mesh screen to prevent the cargo from spilling forward into the small passenger area and the open cockpit.

After the nimble plane had taken off, Siri unbuckled his safety belt and recovered Hatch's mystery bag from the stowage locker. It contained two black, waterproof, plastic bags. He opened the largest one from which he drew out a hardwood case with C.J.H. forming the centre of an intricate ornamental design, inlaid in silver, upon the lid. Laying the box across his lap, Siri unclipped the two

fasteners and cautiously opened it. It contained a Ruger p89 stainless steel, automatic hand-gun. It had a mother of pearl handle and gold fittings, which included the trigger, hammer, catches and screws. Hatches initials, C.J.H., were engraved along the slide. Closing the box, Siri hurriedly replaced it back, out of sight, and opened the second black plastic bag, keeping it within the canvas bag, and cautiously peered inside. It contained a beautifully made, black, leather holster with matching belt that held two clips of ammunition. Both had C.J.H. engraved upon them. There was also a small metal box containing a gun cleaning kit, two spare ammunition clips and a box of fifty rounds of nine millimetre ammunition. Hatch had given him a prized possession, a gift from his parents when he had first left home in the service of his country. Siri, once again, opened the first bag and, being careful to keep it within the canvas bag, out of sight of the aircrew, he took the gun from its case and held it in his right hand. He felt its reassuring weight and the reassuring power of being able to project death up to a range of twenty five yards or more. Replacing the gun, he resealed the black bags and refastened the canvas bag, then passed the strap over his head to wear the bag diagonally across his body and, silently, he thanked Hatch for his generosity.

Both the pilot and co-pilot were Chinese and, during the first hour or so of the flight, they were almost continually chatting loudly to one another. Even though they were talking through headsets, Siri could hear them above the engine noise, although he had no idea of the topics of conversation. However, from their body language and tone, he felt that some of it was directed at him, and he suspected that it was derisory, but he chose to ignore them. His only concern was to get to his destination and, if it meant listening to a couple of Chinese who may or may not be shooting off about native Africans, so be it.

Siri retrieved the red blanket from his backpack and, along with a couple of smaller blankets provided from the locker, he made himself as comfortable as possible.

Siri is a young man again; he is twenty four and he is sitting with the young and beautiful Unica. They are beside a silvery river lined with weeping willows. Each is holding a wineglass, and the remains of a picnic lay about them on a blanket. They're smiling madly as Siri stokes her obviously swollen belly.

It is night-time, six years later in an expensively furnished living room. Siri and Unica are together with their five year old daughter in a beautiful period living room decorated for Christmas. Snow is stroking the windows and a log fire is burning in the grate. A large Christmas tree fills one corner of the room as they exchange and unwrap their presents.

Siri is older, standing beside the dead bodies of both his wife and child. The disembodied voice of a Doctor speaks.

'*I am* sorry Professor Masters. As you know, they were both infected with a therapy resistant infection and there was nothing more that could be done, with the lack of a suitable antibiotic, well...'

'I know, Doctor. Too many developers have been too busy patenting mutant crops to be bothered with antibiotics!'

Siri is inconsolable. His sobs are so deep they uncontrollably shake his whole body.

Siri awoke. He was still in the plane, and it was rocking and lurching. He turned and looked through the cockpit to the windscreen. It was opaque, they were inside a sandstorm. He quickly belted himself into his seat to prevent him from being thrown about, and the pilots were desperately trying to make height, but one engine had failed and was quickly followed by the death of the other.

With a stomach twisting-lurch, the plane fell toward the desert floor. They were descending for a forced landing and, in very little time, the plane had bellied into the sand in almost total blackness.

When Siri regained consciousness, he was still inside the plane and, in the darkness, the only sound was the raging storm. He groped around until he found the two pilots who were almost buried in sand that had burst through the smashed windscreen. Stinging

sand and dust blasted through the cockpit as Siri dug around the unconscious men in an effort to free them. The pilot was dead, but the co-pilot was still alive and, as Siri tapped his face and called out, the co-pilot moved his head opened his eyes. Their combined efforts succeeded in freeing his body and, with great effort, Siri dragged the confused co-pilot into the back of the plane, where they covered their heads with the blankets and awaited the passing of the storm.

It persisted throughout the night and, at first light, as they shared a light meal and water from Siri's supplies, the co-pilot managed to express his gratitude to Siri for his help. Siri considered that digging the dead pilot out from the cockpit, just to rebury him in the desert, would be a pointless waste of energy, and the co-pilot seemed to be in agreement.

They had crashed in the Bayuda Desert, almost directly two hundred miles north of Khartoum and the planes communications were dead. It should have been equipped with Aircraft Emergency Locator Transmitters but, when Siri had tried to insist that they wait for help near the plane, the co-pilot had managed to convey to him that nobody would be aware of their plight, or their location, and that he was not equipped with a PA. They were faced with the crossing of the Bayuda Desert, a remorseless, baking dust-bowl, on foot with little chance of finding water. At one time the region had been thinly populated with Bisharin nomads, when they might have been able to get help but, with the increasing temperatures, life in the desert had become unsustainable, and both the sparse game and the people had been forced to move nearer to the Nile which surrounded the desert to both the north and east.

It occurred to Siri that the co-pilot would be of no help at all. More likely, the presence of someone with little or no wilderness survival experience would be a hindrance. Taking the initiative, Siri returned to the aircraft and collected together his belongings. He shook the sand from his improvised Maasai blanket and, after removing his military fatigues, he secured it around his body over the sheathed machete that he had belted around his waist.

Next he examined the wire gate that divided the crew from the cargo area. It was secured and, while pointing at the lock, Siri

looked to the co-pilot with a shrug for assistance. Initially, he seemed to be bemused about Siri's actions but after a few more attempts, the co-pilot brightened with understanding but then he immediately looked discouraged as he pointed towards the cockpit. Apparently, the key was in the possession of the pilot, and the two men were forced to exhume the body from the sand after all.

Having retrieved the keys, Siri unlocked the baggage compartment and signalled the co-pilot to begin to rebury the body. The packages and bags of smaller items had been hurled about by the landing, and Siri used his machete to begin the task of examining the entire payload for anything that might be of use in their attempt to survive and reach safety. He opened the side doors, and anything of no use was hurled from the plane to create some working space. And it was not long before he had accumulated far more items of potential use than they could possibly carry. When the co-pilot had completed the reburial of the pilot, understandably, he seemed to be very reticent to assist Siri in his pillaging of the cargo for which he was responsible; however, he seemed keen enough to collect and repack the carelessly discarded items from the desert back into the hold.

By midday, the temperature in the aircraft was unbearably hot, and the two men were forced to rest outside in the shade provided by the fuselage, but their prospects of survival, in the short term at least, had taken a turn for the better. The contents of the plane proved to be an eye-opener, although they were unable to exchange their views at what they had found, other than the occasional low whistle or raised eyebrows.

They were lying on a scattering of luxury silk sheets and bed covers whilst listening to music, curtesy of someone's entertainment centre. For refreshment, they were enjoying a selection of vacuum packed meats, cheeses, dates and other rare delicacies to compliment a particularly fine brandy which they were reluctantly, but wisely, mixing with bottled soda. They had also discovered a large quantity of bottled mineral water, which had resulted in them laughing together in relief for several minutes. A bale of Islamic Prayer Mats had been found, and many had inbuilt compasses to indicate the

direction of Mecca. As was the water, these were a stunning piece of good fortune as, although both men were capable of navigating by the sun and stars, a compass would make the task considerably easier.

Their good fortune had inspired an impromptu party and they were not alone. They were each accompanied by a young lady, or to be more accurate, two fully functioning geisha girl manikins that were attempting to mix and serve their drinks and provide some rudimentary conversation. To be fully functional, they were designed to operate on a level surface and interact with their programming through Baigle. Also, without suitable docking points, their batteries would not last very long. Initially the manikins had spoken Chinese, much to the co-pilots amusement, but Siri's silicon friend soon recognised his language and she had quickly adjusted to speaking English. They were very novel companions; someone was going to be very disappointed when the loss of the plane was reported.

After sunrise the following morning, the men rose to begin their two hundred mile trek across the desert with as much water and food as they could carry in their back-packs. They had planed to leave far earlier but they had consumed too much alcohol to travel or care, and had overslept. It was not a good beginning. Siri had intended to readopt his strategy of a predawn start and midday siesta, but both he and the co-pilot were in good spirits, and optimistic about their chances of completing the anticipated one hundred miles or so to Khartoum. Unfortunately, they were unaware that it was at least two hundred miles to the south, and that the Nile lay within an easy sixty mile hike in the opposite direction.

Using Siri's spears for walking aids, they struck out and within a couple of hours, they had reached the Bayuda Volcanic Field, an area of almost one-hundred volcanic craters, some rising to almost two hundred meters above the surrounding plane. The pilot was dismayed at this discovery, as he had originally calculated that they had landed well beyond this land mark. He attempted to explain his mistake to Siri with drawings of the map in the sand but, having travelled this far south, Siri was keen to push on without further

delays and the co-pilot eventually relented, trusting in Siri's judgement.

Although there had been no eruptions for over one-thousand years, the craters looked untouched by time, and the travellers could imagine explosions and flames erupting around them, without warning, at any moment. There was more than twenty miles of this primeval looking landscape ahead of them and they were forced to spend one night amongst the craters.

Before sleeping, they had managed to exchange names. Siri gave his name as David, and the co-pilot was Ji Dun. He knew the English translation, which was, Lucky, and when Siri attempted to address the co-pilot by his Chinese name, he waved it away and insisted on being addressed as Lucky.

They set out again the following morning, predawn, and had soon left the moonscape behind them. In the late morning, using his two spears, Siri pitched a silk bed-sheet to make a bivouac and provide some shade from the intense heat during their midday siesta. Once the worst of heat has subsided, they continued on into the evening. And so a routine was established, and the days passed uneventfully.

There were scuttling scorpions at night and the occasional lizard during the day, but no other terrestrial animals were evident. Vultures; however, were constantly within sight during daylight. It seemed as if they had become used to a situation where any larger animals that entered their desert terrain rarely escaped with their lives. And, in their experience, it was only a matter of time before their patients would be rewarded.

Initially, Siri and Lucky were each carrying more than thirty kilos of supplies, and most of their burden consisted of water but, by the time they had covered half of the distance, it was evident that their supplies were diminishing too quickly and their daily rations would have to be reduced. As it was, Lucky was unable to maintain Siri's natural pace, or walk continuously through the mornings or afternoons without resting. But after the introduction of reduced rations, their progress became progressively worse. By the tenth day, Lucky had opened his last two litre bottle of water, and it took

another three days before Siri had decided to give-up on his companion. They were both seriously dehydrated and Lucky's exposed skin was badly blistered, some of which had become infected. Siri had shared his remaining water, eking it out as much as possible, but Lucky could no longer remain on his feet. He had considered carrying Lucky, but realised that the idea was absurd. Poor Lucky was finished and Siri would be, unless he pressed on alone. He pitched a bivouac over Lucky, and made him as comfortable as he could.

Standing over him, Siri spoke to himself.

'Who am I kidding?' He laughed. With his head thrown back, he gave a deep-chested belly-laugh at the sky and shouted, '*Lucky? You cannot be fucking serious.*' and his laughter gradually subsided. Lucky was too far gone to give much of a reaction, but he thought that Siri had gone insane. When Siri finally collected his wits, he went to work with determination. He tore a silk sheet into strips and platted them into a strong length of improvised rope. Then, dismantling the bivouac, he made a stretcher with the two spears, using the rope to form webbing between them. Putting the stretcher alongside Lucky, he rolled him over onto the construction and secured him to it using more silk strips. After a brief examination of his work, he picked up the two spears at the head end and began to drag Lucky in a roughly southerly direction with every expectation of them both being dead within forty-eight hours.

At noon the following day, a Chinese pilot from the airbase at Khartoum reported seeing suspicious looking personnel within a few hundred meters of the perimeter fence, and a patrol was sent out to deal with a potential situation. A military jeep drove up to where the two men lay unconscious, and two armed Chinese military personnel jumped out and cautiously approached.

Siri, hearing them, struggled to open his eyes. A Chinese corporal confronted him in Mandarin.

'What are you doing. Who are you?' he demanded, as he jabbed his boot into Siri's side.

Although Siri didn't understand the words, the threat was clear, but he was too dehydrated and exhausted to speak, and the guard became increasingly agitated.

'Answer!' he shouted, and kicked Siri in the shoulder.

Seeing their condition, the other soldier had returned to the jeep for a jerry-can of water, which he sloshed over the two stricken men's faces. Siri caught some in his hands and drank what he could, until he remembered Lucky. He turned and tried to get him to drink. After a few drops had passed between Luck's dry and cracked lips, he began to move his head and feebly attempted to swallow. The water had washed away some of the dust and grime from Lucky's uniform to reveal a military insignia and the corporal, realising that Lucky was a Chinese officer, stooped down in order to examine him more closely. He waved his comrade with the jerry can nearer and, with water cupped in his hands, he trickled some into Lucky's mouth.

After being ministered in this way for a few minutes, Lucky lifted his head and tried to focus on the corporal.

'Air Force First Lieutenant of the 101st Regiment, 34th Transport Division,' he said in a barely audible whisper.

The corporal stood and spoke through his communication system, a military version of a PA, and reported what he had found, and he requested an ambulance recovery of the two men. Then he stepped back and smartly saluted with an expression of obvious concern about his future career.

Siri was hospitalised at the Chinese base for three days before he was discharged. He was still very weak, and it would take several more days for him to recover most of his strength. Lucky; however, who had been in a much poorer condition, was still being treated for dehydration. On discharge, Siri was escorted to his quarters, which could be better described as a cell as it was a very small bedsit with a barred window. However, it was comfortable enough. There was a media screen and, without success, Siri set about searching for any news in English, or French, that was available through its limited access to Baigle.

The Chinese commanding officer in Khartoum, Commander Ho, was sitting and working at his office desk. He was in his early middle age and, at six feet, stood tall for a Chinese national. There was a rap on the door and he replied in Mandarin: ‘Come!’

The door opened inwards to reveal a particularly short, slightly overweight and ill-tempered looking Sergeant; this was Sergeant Wang.

‘Yes Sergeant?’

‘The prisoner, as you ordered Commander. I don’t trust him,’ said the sergeant.

‘Come come Sergeant, let’s not be too hasty. Please invite our guest to enter, we can’t leave him in the hallway. And you needn’t wait Sergeant, I’m sure you have a lot of duties to attend to.’

The sergeant looked alarmed and blustered, ‘Yes Sir. I mean, No Sir. He might be dangerous. He looks dangerous.’

The commander couldn’t resist the temptation to torment the sergeant, whom he knew to be both lazy and a bully. He coolly attempted to help the sergeant in his confusion.

‘Sergeant, by, “No,” are you refusing to comply with my request for you to leave or, is it the case that you do not have any pressing duties to perform?’

‘No sir, yes... but. Sorry sir?’

The commander raised his hand and interrupted the floundering sergeant, ‘Please do not concern yourself Sergeant. You may leave to continue whatever it is that requires your attention.’

The sergeant, whose suspicion and dislike of Siri had been overtaken by his relief at being dismissed, saluted, turned and almost tripped over his own feet in his haste to get out of the commander’s office. Once outside, he directed Siri through, closed the door and, shaking his head with disapproval, he returned to his afternoon of watching school girl rape porn in 3D whilst on duty.

The commander had returned his attention to his administrative duties, leaving Siri standing before him, until he looked up and spoke in perfect American English.

‘Please, why don’t you take a seat, Professor?’

Siri meekly sat, but was so openly surprised at being addressed as “Professor,” that the commander began to doubt that he has correctly identified his guest.

‘It *is* Professor Sironka Miterienanka Masters? Or am I mistaken?’

Siri was shocked and couldn’t believe that Hatch had betrayed him, but he saw little point in denying his identity and, if it meant him being shipped back to the US, well, so be it; he had tried and was too tired to fight any more.

‘No, you’re not mistaken! But you seem to have the advantage of me. How is it that everyone seems to know who I am?’

The commander briefly laughed.

‘Firstly, may I say what an honour it is to finally meet you? We’ve been expecting you for some time.’

At this comment, Siri’s jaw dropped in surprise. The commander stood and walked to a drinks cabinet nearby and asked, ‘Drink?’

Siri recovered from his bewilderment enough to reply, ‘Yes, I’ll have a brandy, if you have one.’

‘We are temporally out of brandy, as our supplies have been delayed, but Lucky assures me that it will be worth waiting for. I’m afraid that you will have to settle for bourbon?’ said the commander as he poured out two glasses before he returned with a bottle of Indian tonic, and slumped back into his chair.

‘The recovery unit has already returned with anything salvageable, and I do hope that the baggage has remained unharmed.’

The commander, sensing Siri’s unease, smiled before getting down to business.

‘I am Commander Ho of the Peoples Army of China and, the fact is, Professor, we have been aware of your activities for a *very* long time. And to be blunt, we could do with your help. In fact, we insist.’

Siri felt annoyed and frustrated at this further complication to his journey home.

‘So, I’m a prisoner?’ he asked.

The commander rose and topped up his glass as he replied, 'That's up to you. We would prefer it if you cooperated voluntarily.'

'And if I *refuse* to, cooperate?'

The commander turned and leant back against the furniture.

'I believe the US authorities would be most grateful for your return Professor. If you are to be of no use to us, there's little point in housing you. However, if you were to choose to assist us, you would have everything you need for your work, and your leisure.'

'What, precisely, do you want from me Commander?'

The Commander took a few paces across the room as he collected his thoughts.

'My superiors insist that I must persuade you to head a team who are working on the restoration of Lake Victoria. As you must know, the lake has been dead for some time, and toxins from the lake have been finding their way into the Nile, even the delta sediments have become poisonous.'

Siri was no longer angry, just tired, and the Commander, sensing this, became more amiable. He slumped back into his seat before explaining what was expected.

'As someone who played a leading role in restoring the great lakes of North America, we really could do with your expertise, Professor.'

'Commander-'

'Please, my name is *Ho*, and please forgive my crude ultimatum, but this is a vital resource that must be restored to health for the benefit of us all.'

Siri recognised the truth in Ho's words, and he knew when he was beaten, besides, Ho's proposition was intriguing.

'No apology necessary... Ho. And, please, Siri is how I'm generally known, but is it appropriate to address you as Ho? No offence intended but, Ho, is a very small and informal form of address for a position of considerable authority.'

Ho smiled.

'No offence taken but, as you are a civilian, Ho will suffice. Besides, it's only one letter short of Mao, the man who united the whole of China under communism and ruled for many years.'

‘And Tibet,’ Siri added with a smile.

‘Yes, well, I don’t think we need go over that old chestnut,’ said Ho, ‘Shall we just leave it that, unlike the West, the Chinese don’t require big names to bolster their egos.’

‘Touché,’ said Siri.

The bourbon may have been partially responsible, but Siri was growing to like this Commander Ho, in spite of being kept prisoner, and he added, ‘So, if the brevity of your name is anything to go by, you are virtually without an ego.’

Ho smiled.

‘If only that were so,’ he said, ‘My full name can be translated into English as, *Great Ocean of Brightness*. In Chinese it’s *Huang Ho Peng*. Ho is fine!’

‘To return to the issue in hand,’ said Siri, ‘I’ve been travelling for so long, I’m tired, very tired, and now not so sure that I will ever see my homeland or my family again, and I am very concerned for their safety.’

Ho thought for a moment before replying.

‘The Tanzanian Maasai, and those in south-west Kenya, live within a proscribed reservation under the protection of the Chinese Government. An arrangement from the EADUN Directive, in which I believe you played a significant part. Co-operate with us, Siri, and help us to breathe life back into Lake Victoria and I will see to it that you and your Maasai are well protected, and you would be free to visit your people on a regular basis.’

This was more than Siri was hoping for, in fact it was a generous proposition, provided that Ho could be trusted. But what choice did he have?

‘I think you’ve just made me an offer that I can’t refuse. Even if I had a choice, I would be happy to accept on that basis.’

‘You will be here for a few days, so think about what I have said and give me your answer when you are ready.’

‘It’s strange,’ said Siri, ‘but this is the second time that an outsider has offered to help the Maasai because of me.’

Ho looked at Siri with a knowing smile and replied,

‘Yes, your friend Musab and the attack on the Arab prince. Did you know that Musab bears the title of Sultan Ul-Mujahidin and, according to our intelligence, he is based at a boarder garrison at Kilimanjaro, and in overall command of the Islamic Brotherhood in East Africa?’

Again Siri was struck dumb, was there nothing that these people didn’t know about him? Captain Dragon, his old friend Hatch and now the Chinese, it seemed that he had no secrets. It was then that he realised why he had always felt under observation in the US. Of course, they knew everything about his activities and relationships. Looking back, he was surprised that he had even been allowed into the States, let alone been employed on a classified project.

Ho spoke again.

‘I see that, as they say in England, the penny has dropped.’

‘My God,’ said Siri. ‘This is going to take some thinking about, and Musab is at Kilimanjaro you say.’

‘Yes, to the best of our knowledge.’ said Ho.

‘Ho, don’t you think it odd that the three of us are all here, in East Africa after several decades, or is it really just a coincidence?’

‘I take it by the three of us, you mean your Oxford friends, Musab, Vice Admiral Hatchet and yourself,’ Ho ventured.

‘Yes,’ Siri replied, no longer at all surprised at the Commanders knowledge.

Ho shrugged and replied.

‘I really couldn’t say, but I’m sure that we’re all helpless pawns in some very dangerous games that are being played out somewhere, but no doubt time will tell all.’

Siri was lost in thought, the whole situation had become completely out of his control.

Seeing that he needed some time alone to think, Ho spoke again.

‘Sergeant Wang will see you to your quarters but you’re free to explore if you wish, and you can let me have your answer tomorrow.’

Siri snapped out of his thoughts and answered.

‘Thanks, but I don’t need to think about it. Firstly, I don’t really have a choice and, secondly, helping to bring Lake Victoria back to life would be a positive thing to work for amid all this chaos and intrigue.’

Ho smiled and visibly relaxed. It was clear that he had been under a lot of pressure to gain Siri’s co-operation and, Siri thought, ‘Why not work with the Chinese?’ The fact was that, as far as he could make out, when it came to duplicity, there wasn’t a hairs breadth between any of the major political blocks. When necessary, they could all be a complete load of manipulative, selfish bastards.

Feeling more confident, Siri spoke again.

‘Nothing personal but, for some reason, I’m generally not overly inclined to trust the Chinese government; however, if I have your assurance of freedom of movement, you have a deal.’

‘I’m not sure whether to take that as an insult to my country, or a compliment to myself, but I am very pleased that you accept on those terms, Excellent!’

As both men stood, Siri spat on his hand and reached over to shake on the deal. Ho was a little taken aback but, when he looked up and saw Siri’s amusement, he clasped Siri’s hand and shook with a broad smile and with very little sign of discomfort and, to his credit, after Siri released his hand he managed to resist the impulse to immediately wipe his sticky palm off against his clothes.

‘One question, Ho. The Commander of City Victoria, will he respect your undertaking?’

‘Oh yes, you need have no fear of that,’ Ho assured him. ‘But you will actually be under the authority of the City Supervisor who is a great personal friend of mine; you need have no worries there.’

Ho had moved behind his desk, and he produced a small silk pouch with a draw string which he offered to Siri.’

‘Could you please give this to the supervisor for me? It’s something very valuable that was left in my care some time ago. I’ve always intended to return it but, time passes.’

‘Yes, of course,’ replied Siri, puzzled by the situation. He took the pouch and pocketed it, dismissing it from his mind as Sergeant Wang silently appeared behind him.

‘Sergeant Wang will escort you back to your quarters until you leave for City Victoria,’ said Ho, ‘And, when you see the Supervisor, please pass on my regards.’

Siri replied.

‘I will be sure to do that Ho, on the first occasion that I meet him. And thanks for the drink.’

Siri left the room and, as Sergeant Wang closed the door, Ho smiled as he stood beside his desk and softly chuckled to himself.

‘Yes, do give him my regards, old boy and, good luck.’

Chapter XVII

LAKE VICTORIA

Siri was put aboard a plane to Kisumu, the administrative centre of City Victoria. It was a Chinese military transport plane which he shared with a company of Chinese troops, their assorted equipment and light vehicles. Apart from his weapons, Siri had been allowed to keep all his equipment, and the loss of Hatch's pistol had rankled him, although he had been assured that it would be in safekeeping until it could be returned.

As they approached the giant lake, Siri could clearly see it through an observation window. It extended on to the horizon and, with no sight of any opposing shore, it was undistinguishable from an ocean. The city had been developed around the entire lake, and he was passing over a mixture of buildings and fields of produce. Some were open to the elements, whilst others were entirely enclosed under transparent domes. The buildings were also, mainly, constructed beneath huge transparent domes with the occasional high tower, and were arranged in mixed groups to form communities which were evenly spread around the development.

The architecture was, generally, similar in appearance to that employed at City Victoria, and Siri imagined that it must be based on a similar technology. For some reason he had expected it to look Chinese, or at least to have some architectural references to traditional Chinese design but, as far as he could see from above, there was nothing in the appearance of the place to indicate any oriental influence.

After landing, Siri was put through the usual induction procedure which consisted of a security search, decontamination, being issued with a new set of clothes and, finally, a briefing on what was expected of him both at work and in his own time. It was only when this tiresome procedure had been completed that he was escorted to his quarters, which consisted of a large and very comfortable apartment overlooking the great lake to the west. To Siri's surprise, he was provided with a comprehensive wardrobe of

his precise measurements, and a human personal assistant, Bik Bo, an attractive Chinese lady who also acted as chef and housekeeper. Siri was exhausted from travelling and, after being served a splendid evening meal which had been prepared and served to him by Bo, he retired early as he was due to meet the supervisor in the mid-morning of the following day.

After breakfast, and under the guidance of Bo, Siri dressed himself from his new and highly fashionable wardrobe in preparation for his meeting with the city supervisor. She then escorted him to the place of appointment and, after taking a glass elevator to the uppermost floor, Bo left him to await the supervisor.

During his wait, Siri examined his immediate surroundings in more detail. The building consisted of a huge transparent dome, maybe one hundred and fifty feet high, that was internally divided into five or six floors. As far as he could see, most of the floors were transparent and open-plan, although he assumed that there must be some areas that enjoyed some privacy, if only for basic human functions. The office where he had been left, if that was what it was, as it may have been the supervisor's personal quarters, was on the uppermost floor with the dome arching up to thirty feet or more overhead. The transparent material which encased the building, was darker where it received direct sunlight but remained completely clear on the shaded side and, as the floors were also transparent, he could see down through several levels to a rock garden, satisfyingly oriental in style which he had first noticed from the glass elevator.

The furnishings were sparse and also transparent. They had prisms incorporated into their construction that refracted the sunlight and projected brilliant rainbows at seemingly random directions onto an otherwise colourless environment. A large crystal sculpture of a stylized mountain, a water feature, complete with details of a traditional Chinese village with a river cascading through it under bridges and over waterfalls, stood in the centre of the room. After completing its journey, the miniature river disgorged its waters over the last ornate waterfall, down through an opening through the transparent floor to a pool below. He was uncertain what to expect from the supervisor and, as he awaited his arrival, he made his way

slowly around the room, examining everything in detail and marvelling at its beauty when, seemingly, from nowhere, someone in a business suit appeared beside him.

At first he assumed that it was the supervisor but, as he turned, he instantly realised it was an oriental woman. Her hair was black, straight and shoulder length with a severe fringe cut to the exact width of her face, and there was a matching severity in her facial expression that instantly made Siri feel uncomfortable. He hoped that the city supervisor wouldn't be delayed much longer as an awkward silence enveloped them, until the woman broke the tension by speaking in English with a heavy Chinese accent.

'Please don't be alarmed, Professor Masters. Would you like some refreshments?'

'Yes, thank you,' replied Siri. 'Please... will the supervisor be here soon? Only I have an appointment to see him.'

'You seem to have been misinformed, Professor, I am the city supervisor.'

Siri's face revealed his surprise and the supervisor's expression became even more severe.

The Supervisor's attitude toward the native Africans patriarchies was not sympathetic. She also considered them to be primitives, and she was extremely dubious about the value of Siri's expertise to her community. However, In spite of her prejudices, there was a glimmer of a smile as she extended her hand.

'Let me introduce myself, Professor. I am Supervisor May Ling, and Commander Ho tells me that you have something for me.'

Siri had to quickly think back to his conversation with Ho, but his only recollection, in connection with the supervisor, was that Ho had led him to believe that he was a man. Then he remembered the silk pouch.

'Yes, one moment Supervisor,' he replied, as he vainly searched for his non-existent trouser leg patch pocket. Panicking, he searched the pockets of his new clothes and, relieved, he found that Bo had already transferred his possessions from his military clothes, including his reading glasses and the silk pouch. As he offered the

entrusted item to May Ling, he made a mental note to thank Bo upon his return to his accommodation.

‘He asked me to give you this, and to pass on his regards.’

May Ling was about to reply, when a disembodied Chinese male voice interrupted. It was her PA and it addressed her in Mandarin Chinese.

‘I am sorry to disturb you Madam. General Zeng Jing demands your immediate attention.’

‘Put him through Zhou.’

‘Yes Madam.’

A three-dimensional image of General Zeng Jing appeared in the room facing May Ling.

‘Supervisor, I understand you have intercepted a prisoner without my knowledge and without proper authority, when he should have been in transit to my interrogation quarters.’

‘I think there has been a misunderstanding, Commander. If you are referring to Professor Masters, he is subject to civilian supervision which is my responsibility.’

General Zeng Jing’s face almost snarled as he replied, ‘I will not tolerate your interference in matters of security, *Supervisor*. Military personnel are stationed around your residence and you are to hand the prisoner over to them immediately.’

‘You exceed your authority, *Commander*. You are well aware that Professor Masters is to assist in our scientific endeavours and, as such, he falls under civilian jurisdiction. Or should I seek clarification from the Committee?’

There was silence as the enraged commander struggled with his inevitable defeat and, after a few moments, the image abruptly disappeared.

In spite of not understanding a word that was said, Siri had moved nearer to the image and May Ling, in a vain effort to understand something of the exchange. He was sure that it somehow involved him, and he couldn’t resist fishing for answers.

‘I suspect that had something to do with me, Supervisor?’

‘Yes. But not to worry, it has been settled. We won’t be hearing from the military for a while,’ she said, and turned to face Siri.

As he looked down into her eyes, he surprised himself by thinking how attractive they were, but he quickly put it down to not having enjoyed the companionship of a woman for a very long time, and he silently cautioned himself from making judgements about the attractiveness of any woman under those conditions.

May Ling; however, found the unexpected closeness of his body repellent. Nonetheless, the confrontation with General Zeng Jing had made her feel defensive toward her new charge and, in spite of herself; she was intrigued by this man. She knew of his scientific achievements and his reputation for having a brilliant mind and, without thinking it through, she found herself spontaneously making a kind gesture towards him.

‘You must stay for dinner, Professor Masters. It’s the least I can do to help you settle in to your new life, here in City Victoria.’

Siri was a little taken aback by her unexpected kindness, but he was happy to accept. Even the company of this hard nosed authoritarian, he thought, would be better company than sitting in his quarters waiting for sleep, and she *had* saved him from, what could have been, more unpleasant security examinations.

‘Thank you, that’s very kind of you,’ he said.

‘Not at all, it will be my pleasure,’ she surprised herself by replying.

It was early summer in 2056, the months had passed quickly for Siri in City Victoria as Siri had become obsessed with the planned restoration of the lake, which had been going well.

All the approved surrounding agriculture had been checked for run-off and, when necessary, water treatment installations had been provided. Also, the Chinese had been slowly working up the rivers and tributaries that fed the lake, shutting down any unauthorised activities that created pollution of any kind. Siri was thankful that he had not been asked to take part in this operation, as he knew, only too well, that they were creating starvation among many of the surviving subsistence farming communities that worked the land to

either side of the waterways. Once he was confident that all the sources of contamination that fed into the lake had been removed, the work necessary to restore the flora and fauna in the lake could begin in earnest.

In his fully equipped laboratory, Siri had isolated a range of microorganisms, which he hoped would soon be ready in sufficient quantities to be introduced into the lake. They were to convert the cocktail of harmful and toxic substances into inert and safe compounds. Because of the sheer size of the lake, much of the contamination would have to be left in the silt at the bottom, for the time being, but he had a few ideas about how they might be able to tackle even that challenge.

The laboratory mostly consisted of isolation booths, monitor screens and microscopes. Siri was sitting, staring at a screen as May Ling entered wearing very stylish and impracticable robes. She walked up to stand behind him to view the image, and he was so adsorbed that he failed to notice her presence, until she began to massage his shoulders and ask, ‘How’s it going?’

When Siri had arrived at City Victoria, his priority was to complete his work as quickly as possible and move on to settle in his beloved Maasai Mara. To spend his declining years surrounded by his family was his dearest wish, and the prime reason for undertaking his perilous journey. He had hoped to catch-up a little on all the lost years wasted in pursuing the hope that the damage done to the environment, by generations of reckless stupidity, could be somehow repaired. Now, everything had changed because of his relationship with May Ling. He still intended to visit his village, very soon, but there was always something involving his work that made it impossible for him to leave.

He had loved Unica, but he had been unfair and selfish by insisting on living in two worlds. He also regretted not having taken Liloë to the US. He knew that he was once more being selfish, now that he had again found happiness. He told himself that his work would make a real contribution in his ancestral homeland and, hopefully, one day restore some of the natural balance to the environment which would allow his people to live, once more, in the

way that they were best suited. The simple truth was that he had found happiness and contentment in the arms of May Ling and the life that they shared, protected from the horrific realities of the outside world.

Until May Ling had met Siri, she had been totally committed to the Peoples Republic of China machine. Voluntarily or involuntarily, she couldn't remember which, she had devoted her life to the service of her country with no thought of her personal needs or desires. She had never married, although she had once been engaged to be married and, when she had first seen Siri, standing in her living quarters, she had simultaneously found him physicality repulsive and disturbing. His brown skin reminded her of the ignorant rural peasants that were still allowed to persist in parts of China, and the contrast with his pink palms seemed unnatural. His curly hair made her skin crawl, and he seemed to be far too sweaty. Even so, in spite of these perceptions, his presence excited her with feelings that had become only a memory, and she had been unable to suppress imagining what it would be like to be intimate with him.

He had a brilliant mind and he was modest, gentle and kind. He was also tall and strong, well formed, and he moved with the self assured grace of an athlete. Soon, instead of only seeing the physical differences, she saw that they shared many similarities in their desire for the common good, a rare quality. And, instead of being repulsed, she began, in spite of her prejudices, to imagine their lovemaking in greater detail. And when her imagination became reality, she was both startled and excited at being stripped of her powers of self control, and by her overpowering emotions.

As May Ling eased out the cramped muscles in Siri's shoulders, he explained to her the state of play in the effort to restore Lake Victoria to health.

'We've completed the first phase of clearing the sources of contamination, this alone is sufficient to restore the lake to health, eventually. But to help things along a little we're almost ready to begin the second phase,' said Siri. 'Everything is waiting now for the completion of the first batch of modified low temperature Crenarchaea.'

‘We thoroughly tested the strain before introducing them to the Great Lakes in the US, but we’ve run them through again here with samples from Victoria, just to play safe. These microbes are vicious little sods, and I don’t want to make things worse. We know it can work, and it should work here, in theory.’

May Ling had been continually smiling behind him, and she had barely heard a word. She knew that he was honest, and that he was doing his best to help, and any scrutiny could only be a distraction and hamper his progress.

‘I haven’t seen you for days, Siri, have you forgotten about me? And you’re looking so tired, you’re working far too hard,’ she accused him.

Siri abandoned his work, turned in his swivel chair to face May Ling, and clasped her waist.

‘May Ling, I have so much to finish. I promise we’ll spend some time together soon but, for now, I *must* stay here and push the project along.’

May Ling grabbed both his cheeks in her hands, her face became stern and she spoke with the voice of the Supervisor.

‘No! You are of no use to this project if you are burnt out. As your superior, and remember, you may rule over my affections but this is my city under Chinese administration, and you know the penalty for disobedience and subversion. I still give the orders.’

Siri chuckled.

‘Okay, okay, I’ll obey my superior. You don’t have to shoot me.’

‘If you haven’t reported to my quarters by six this evening, I will send an armed guard to drag you back to me. Is that understood, Professor Masters?’

Siri smiled into her eyes and she relented and hugged his face to her breast.

‘I worry for you Siri. I worry for us. I love you so much and it scares me. I don’t think that I’ve ever been so frightened before, just at the thought of losing you. Please come home.’

Siri stood and held her against him and stroked her long black hair.

‘I promise, and I won’t be late.’

She pulled away from him as he released her. Her eyes were wet as she stepped back and regained her composure.

‘You’d better not be!’ she said sternly then, turning, she walked towards the entrance doors to the laboratory.

‘May Ling,’ Siri called after her. ‘I have never asked how you managed to get hold of the modified Crenarchaea?’

May Ling turned and, in all seriousness, proclaimed, ‘We have out contacts but, if I told you, I would have to have you shot!’

Siri was shocked at her comment, but she smiled and quickly said.

‘That is a Western joke, yes?’

‘May Ling, don’t give up your day job!’

It was May Lings turn to look confused, and Siri continued, ‘Don’t worry, just another Western joke. I will see you later, I promise!’

That evening, Siri and May Ling were on the upper level of her residence, reclined on a couch. She was lying back against him with her head against his shoulder and his arms were encircling her as they gazed up through the starlit dome.

‘Siri?’

‘Yes love?’

‘I’m carrying our child - a girl!’

Siri moved his head away to look into her dark eyes, and he asked, ‘But what about your regulations? Does anyone else know about this? Do we need to leave?’

‘I don’t have to go through with it, if you don’t want me to.’

It was the first time that he had seen her looking utterly vulnerable, childlike, waiting for his reassurance. He gently hugged her.

‘No! No, I do, if you are happy. For us to have a daughter together is wonderful, but what sort of a future is there for her?’

She smiled.

‘It’s okay, Siri, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s safe enough here and we have a personal stake in the future of City Victoria, it will be our child’s future we are working for.’

Siri held her close again.

‘I love you very much, May Ling, and as long as you are happy, this is the best news that I could have hoped for.’

‘O Siri, what have you done to me?’

He rested his hand onto her stomach and she playfully hit him.

‘I don’t mean that.’ Lifting his hand to her chest she said, ‘I mean here, in my heart.’

They held each other in love and in fear for what the future may bring for them and their child.’

The weeks, the months passed and the work on the lake was going well, it couldn’t be hurried, the biological processes had to be left to develop in their own time, but Siri was hopeful that fish could be reintroduced to the lake within a few years. His worry was that the Nile Perch had persisted in some remote, less toxic corner of the lake. It was a huge freshwater fish that was alien to Lake Victoria, and grew to two meters or more in length. If this predatory nightmare had managed to survive, it would again colonise the lake and there would be little hope of restoring the huge variety of smaller fish that were the originally inhabitants.

There was little more to be done but sit back and monitor the situation and, as Siri was musing over his screen, checking the water quality readings from the monitors that were placed around the lake, May Ling came into the laboratory. Before she could complain about him spending too much time at work and not enough time with her, he said, ‘May Ling, come with me to my family home, just for a few days. We can have a break and forget everything, be together. I know my family would like to meet you and I can’t delay my homecoming any longer.’

She stood behind his chair and hugged him.

‘Thank you Siri. I would like that very much, but what about the baby? She will arrive in a few weeks.’

‘Can we commandeer a helicopter and crew for a couple of days? Then, if you started your contractions we could have you back in a couple of hours.’

May Ling stood back and admonished him for his inconsideration.

‘I’m not one of your village women who can give birth in the middle of the day and return to work as if nothing has happened. The doctor tells me the baby will be at least four kilos and, in case you haven’t noticed, I’m a bit on the small side. I wasn’t designed to bear the offspring of an old bull like you, and I am going to need all the help that I can get.’

Siri left his chair and took May Ling into his arms as he meekly replied, ‘Your right. I’m sorry for suggesting it. Maybe we can go after the birth, when you feel well enough.’

May Ling seemed to be confused about her outburst.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s okay. I don’t know, maybe I just wanted to make sure you weren’t taking me for granted, that’s all. Your right, we can go to your village, it’s not that far and, of course I can organise transport.’

A few days later, Siri and May Ling travelled the two hundred miles to Siri’s village in a military helicopter. They landed outside the village barricade and, by the time the door had slid open and Siri had stepped out smiling, a large group of villagers were excitedly waiting to shout their greetings.

A small group of the young men had quickly assembled and were chanting as they danced in formation. Siri’s oldest son, Lemayian, was there to greet them. He had become headman following the death of his great uncles, Mrjooli and Tonkei, and Lemayian was well named; he had his grandfather’s powerful build. He greeted his father in English.

‘Hello Father. It is good to see you again.’

‘Hello, Lemayian, it’s good to see you too. This is May Ling. I suppose she’s your step mother.’

This amused Lemayian. He turned to May Ling and towered over her as she lifted her head to look at him. He took her very small hand, gave a slight nod and said, ‘Greetings May Ling Mother, and welcome to your Maasai home.’

‘Thank you Lemayian. You are most gracious,’ replied May Ling.

Siri laughed at the two of them commenting, ‘Where have you two learned your English etiquette, in the mid nineteenth century?’

‘You had better not let Mabel hear you. She may be eighty-two but that’s far short of two hundred years,’ said Lemayian.

‘Miss Mabel Mars, she is still alive?’

‘Very much so but, first, I think you had better greet your daughter.’

Lemayian glanced across to a middle-aged woman that was standing beside him. Siri had assumed that she was Lemayian’s wife and, for a moment, he was unsure of what to say.

‘Father, do you not recognize me?’

He looked into her smiling eyes and saw the unmistakable resemblance to Lilo her mother.

‘Namelok,’ he cried, and scooped her into his arms, and she melted into his hug and was a little girl again in the arms of the often absent father.

They parted to look at one another.

‘Namelok, you have changed.’

‘It has been almost seven years, Father.’

‘Yes, I know, I am sorry I should have-’

‘You had more important things to worry about Father. Now, May Ling, help me get this stubborn man of yours in some shade, out of this heat.’

‘Mm, I see you still have your mother's wilful nature,’ Siri observed.

‘She loved you right up to her death Father,’ said Namelok.

‘You were with her?’

‘We both were Father,’ said Lemayian. ‘She died peacefully at home.’

‘Good.’ said Siri, ‘that’s a comfort to know. I tried to return, but it was impossible. And by the time that I received news of her death, thanks only to Mabel’s short-wave radio, I was already planning my return but it took time.’

Siri, with May Ling and his family, began walking back into the village enclosure. They were surrounded by the villagers who all insisted on greeting Siri and May Ling before they dispersed and returned to their tasks. Siri commented that the place had hardly changed, and Lemayian’s face became troubled.

‘We cannot remain here much longer. The drought continues to get worse and our cattle are dying. We will either have to move to better pasture or adopt the ways of the Akie.’

‘But what of the old and sick?’ asked Siri.

‘I fear that if we are to continue to survive, there will be no place for the weak and old.’

Lemayian’s statement had shocked his father.

‘Have things really become so desperate?’ he asked.

‘I am afraid that they have, father.’

They continued their walk in silence, as they made their way to see Mabel, at her home adjoining the old school house.

After completing her education, Namelok had assisted Mabel with the children until she had assumed all the teaching duties. This had, supposedly, allowed Mabel to retire, although she still enjoyed taking the odd class.

As they approached Mabel, Siri hardly recognised the old woman that sat on her veranda in a makeshift acacia wood chair. As they drew nearer, she sat up and gave a huge smile and Siri could clearly see the familiar features of his old school mistress.

‘Miterienanka, Is that you? Of course it is! Please ignore a stupid old woman and be welcome, my boy.’

‘Hello, Miss Mars. It’s good to see you again,’ said Siri as he squatted beside her.

‘Hello Miterienanka,’ she said, ‘and who is this beautiful lady standing beside you?’

‘Miss Mars, please let me introduce May Ling, my wife in all but name.’

‘And very shortly to be a mother, if I’m not mistaken,’ said Mabel. ‘Hello dear, I am delighted to meet you,’ and she held out her hand which May Ling dutifully took in hers and gave it a tentative shake.

‘Pleased to meet you too Miss Mars,’ said May Ling, feeling as if she should also attempt a curtsy, but she didn’t.’

‘Please, do call me Mabel; everyone does, once they leave school. But Miterienanka didn’t complete his schooling here, did you Miterienanka?’

‘No Miss...er, Mabel.’

Mabel laughed at his awkwardness. ‘There, you see, it wasn’t so difficult was it.’

Her eye’s unfocussed as she began to reminisce.

‘You could have been my own little boy, Sironka. I rejected your father because of my morality but I think there was a lot of pride involved. I have loved you and the children here as much as I could have loved my own but, now, in hindsight, would it really have been so wicked?’

She held them all in a spell as she paused before turning her attention back to her guests.

‘When I was very young and arrogant I came here to teach savages how to become educated modern citizens. To take their rightful place in the world of civilised people but, I am delighted to say that I have totally failed.’

Mabel chuckled to herself, and then she paused in thought for a moment before continuing her reminiscences.

‘The people attended the school, and the church on Sundays, but it was only out of kindness to me. They were waiting for me to grow up, to understand what it really means to be free and truly live as a human being. I may have taught them a second language, complete with western etiquette with the brighter ones, but they have taught me so much more.

‘Civilisation may have gifted its inmates with an extended life, but it robs them of their freedom. The Maasai live more in harmony with God’s wishes than any so called civilized society. Neither does the Maasai conduct war on one another to satisfy the ambitions of madmen, nor commit idolatry or condone sodomy, nor do they kill their women for falling in love with the wrong man.

‘The Maasai have the one creator god, and live in harmony with creation. They do no harm, unlike so called civilised man that has brought destruction upon us all with his greed and selfishness.’

Mabel sat still and silent, once again drifting off into her thoughts until, remembering that she wasn’t alone.

‘Oh... please ignore the ramblings of a stupid old woman,’ she said, and added, ‘I am being a poor host. You will have tea, wont you?’

She called to Namelok.

‘Please see to our guests, dear.’

‘Yes Mabel, I have the kettle on already,’ Namelok replied.

Mabel explained.

‘Namelok is the real teacher here, and she is every bit as bright as her dear mother Lilo, God bless her soul.’

May Ling was quite charmed by Mabel and found herself thinking of her as Siri’s mother. After tea, which was a not altogether a foul tasting substitute, Lemayian showed Siri and May Ling to their accommodation, a basic mud-hut, but it had been swept clean, there was some traditional Maasai clothing for them both, laid out upon the ox-skin bed, and it was surprisingly spacious.

Before Lemayian left them to settle in, he explained, ‘We have a celebration ready for this evening for the return of our Chief.’

Siri looked at his son with a quizzical expression.

‘But Lemayian, you are Chief here.’

‘While you are with us, father, you are our Chief. You have been the protector and provider for my people for many years. From before I was born you have watched over us, and I know this to be true. No one here is unaware of our debt to you, the father of the people.’

Siri was a little overwhelmed by his son’s dedication, and they clasped each others arms for a moment before Lemayian broke away to supervise the evening’s preparations.

For May Ling, the whole episode of their reception had been a revelation. In common with many people who lived in towns and cities, she had imagined that the native Africans, which clung onto their traditional way of life and culture, were ignorant primitives, dwelling in dust and dirt. She had only been prepared to accompany Siri to his village for a day or two because she realised how much it would mean to him to finally return to his home. And, whilst there was indeed a fair amount of dust and dirt, which May Ling found

difficult to contend with, she was treated as an honoured guest, and the kindness of the villagers overwhelmed her.

During her short stay in the village, Namelok ensured that May Ling was only provided with freshly boiled drinking water, and she was always nearby to assist May Ling in the unfamiliar surroundings. May Ling could see that, not only were the villagers resourceful and self-reliant; contrary to the conceptions of city dwellers, the cultural life of the Maasai was as rich and as developed as their own, and she began to understand why free peoples resisted domestication and the industrial slavery that it had brought about.

That evening, the whole village was gathered in a large circle around a communal fire, eating and drinking a local fermentation. It was a celebration of the return of their benefactor and favoured son of Olamayiani. Siri, dressed as a Maasai, and May Ling, who had declined to do the same, were happily enjoying their evening meal with his family. The two young Chinese pilots and the two older armed guards, that had accompanied them to the village, had also been invited to join in the festivities which they accepted in two shifts. The off-duty guard sat attentively beside May Ling and he refused to eat or drink, preferring to rely on his own supplies, but the young co-pilot was happily mixing with the younger members of the village.

The young women were particularly curious about the Chinese men, but they had little chance of breaking through the crowd of excited Maasai boys who were asking about the helicopter and its armaments. They occasionally saw planes in the distant sky, but this was a great opportunity to satisfy their curiosity and, although the exchange suffered from the lack of a common language, a spattering of English with a good deal of arm-waving seemed to be sufficient.

The evening continued as everyone forgot their worries in the enjoyment of the moment and, as the sun lowered against the horizon, a group of young men in traditional dress lined up and began to dance, brandishing their spears and shields. As the last rays of the setting sun disappeared, the dance reached a climax and all that were able, jumped up and shouted and sang and called out in a spontaneous release of joy and excitement.

A bright flash illuminated the horizon to the North West.

Some of the villagers, who had been facing in that direction, became instantly still and silent as confusion spread among the assembly. A glow remained in the sky, and a horrible suspicion grew in Siri's mind. He spoke to May Ling.

'Did you see that?'

'No, not really,' she replied, ' just a glimpse of light in the corner of my eye! Did you?'

'No, but I can still see a glow in the sky and I think that was near our home and, if it was, it might have been a nuclear explosion.'

Even in the firelight, Siri could see that all the softness in May Ling's face had been replaced with the hard resolution of responsibility.

'They wouldn't dare,' she pronounced.

'Who are they?' asked Siri.

'Anybody!' replied May Ling.

As the helicopter approached the administrative centre in Kisumu, Siri and May Ling could see fires burning around the north coast of lake Victoria into the distance. The detonation had actually taken place over Kampala, the Chinese military centre of City Victoria, and Kisumu had suffered only superficial damage.

The helicopter was equipped with protective clothing that was intended for use in the event of a nuclear or chemical attack and, after ensuring that everyone aboard was suitably protected, May Ling ordered the Pilot to land.

As the helicopter's engine shut down, the sounds of emergency vehicles and personnel racing from one crisis to another could be heard. The helicopter crew had attempted to contact their control centre several times but, without any response, it had to be assumed that it had been destroyed. A number of their fellow pilots had responded by radio, but none had received any orders. Under these circumstances their pilots were prepared to wait until May Ling and Siri, accompanied by the two bodyguards, had returned from investigating the damage to May Ling's home.

Although the damage to the buildings in Kisumu was generally moderate, the occasional fire illuminated their way to the once beautiful house. The dome was mostly smashed on the north side, and some of the contents had been strewn across the surrounding garden.

May Ling and Siri stood for a while, as they watched, fascinated, by a small fire that continued to burn through the heart of the building. As she took in the implications of what had happened, May Ling spoke through her respirator.

‘It’s finished Siri, the Committee will abandon Victoria.’

‘Really, are you sure?’ asked Siri.

‘Sure! They’ll leave a garrison to hold the region but, for the time being, the city is finished and they’ll be looking for someone to be held responsible.’

‘You’ve put so much into it Ling, I’m sorry.’

May Ling turned and looked sorrowfully into Siri’s eyes.

‘I’ll be recalled to Hong Kong for an investigation into this event. Zeng is responsible for security but, if he survived, he will accuse me of complicity with the enemy, and it won’t help that we just happened to be away at the time of the attack. Either way, you and I will be finished.’

‘That’s nonsense.’ Siri tried to reassure her, ‘They can’t hold you responsible for this.’

‘You don’t understand. Every mistake, accident, setback or failure has to be answered by an offender, even if the offender is an innocent scapegoat, to protect someone higher up in the chain of command. They don’t even use the word ‘accident’ they classify everything as an ‘incident’ and always produce a guilty party to punish.’ May Ling lost a little of her composure and clung to Siri.

‘Thousands must have been killed, and all our work, our hopes, I don’t want to lose you as well, Siri. What am I to do?’

‘Come back with me to the village,’ he suggested.

May Ling shook her head. ‘No, we wouldn’t be safe there, and it would bring trouble on to your family.’

Siri struggled to find a solution, then, suddenly exclaimed.

‘I know where we will be safe, but I’ll explain later. Right now we must get away as quickly as possible before you’re apprehended.’

‘You want me to go on the run, become a fugitive from my own people?’

‘Is there another way? If there is, tell me but I can’t see it.’ He replied.

May Ling looked through their protective masks into his eyes, searching for an answer, then turned and, removing her respirator, she called back to the two bodyguards.

‘It’s not safe to be here. Find overland transport for me, fully fuelled with reserves, then report to the pilot of the helicopter, and the four of you find and report to any of your officers that may have survived. After salvaging what I can, we will need the vehicle to get clear of the area ourselves.’

The bodyguards, silently, went about their task, and Siri faced May Ling and asked, ‘Couldn’t we hang on to the helicopter? It would make life a lot easier than travelling by land.’

‘Your not thinking, Siri. How could we conceal our whereabouts if we used an aircraft? Even if we could pilot it ourselves it would be tracked, and the flight would be recorded.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ Siri conceded, ‘I wasn’t thinking it through, but what about your condition?’

‘What choice do we have and, whatever you have in mind, it will have to be some distance away if we are to find safety in hiding?’

‘Kilimanjaro, we’ll be safe there and not too far from my village.’

May Ling’s mouth fell open in surprise.

‘Have you gone mad, Siri? It was most likely the Muslim Brotherhood who was responsible for this outrage.’

Siri smiled reassuringly, but he was hoping that she was wrong.

‘You shouldn’t believe all you hear from the propagandists. We’ll be safe there, trust me.’

‘Oh Siri, I do when it involves your work but... you’re asking a lot of me.’

‘I know,’ Siri sympathised, ‘but we have to leave here, and it’s Kilimanjaro or my village, unless you know of a better plan, and put your respirator back on!’

May Ling shook her head in defeat and replaced her breathing apparatus.

‘No, I don’t know of a better plan, and I doubt that *anywhere* is safe for us, but there is something I have to do before we can leave. Come with me!’

May Ling led Siri towards the remains of her home. He followed her through the ruin until they reached some fallen wreckage in a corner. She turned and said, ‘Give me a hand Siri, I need to get this stuff away.’

They dragged the wreckage clear to uncover a floor safe which May Ling opened and, from it, she removed a leather pilot’s bag and the olive drab canvas bag that contained Hatch’s pistol, which she handed over to him.

‘How did you get this?’ he asked.

‘Let’s just say, Ho owed me! Now let’s go before Zeng, or one of his henchmen, finds us.’

When they emerged from the ruin, the bodyguards had already delivered a jeep adorned with extra Jerry cans, and had left without waiting for them. May Ling and Siri climbed aboard the vehicle, and Siri started the engine.

Not being able to think of a better plan, May Ling finally came to terms with Siri’s suggestion to seek refuge at Kilimanjaro, and she shouted through her respirator.

‘Kilimanjaro it is, then. I just hope you know what you’re doing, Sironka Masters.’

Siri was not sure about anything, all he knew was that he had to protect his wife and child and, if it was true that Musab was at Kilimanjaro, they would be safe from the Brotherhood and, hopefully, from Chinese retribution.

As they drove towards the perimeter, they could see that there were still armed guards at the entrance gate. They were dressed in protective clothing, and waved the jeep to a halt for a security check. May Ling gave their passes to the guards, but they were following

the standard procedures in an emergency, and Siri's pass lacked the necessary level of clearance. Fortunately, May Ling was well known to them, and they accepted her authority to upgrade his clearance. One of the guards asked May Ling, 'Madam Supervisor, what is to become of us, what should we do?'

'I imagine the committee will hold a full inquiry and decide on the future of our City corporal. You just carry on and do your duty for now but, if you don't receive orders within the next four hours and, if you value your lives, I recommend that you report to a command centre further south; get as far away from here as possible!'

Saluting, the Guard said, 'Yes Madam, thank you,' and they drove off.

Chapter XVIII

KILIMANJARO - 2057

The moonlit drive was a world away from travelling in the helicopter. As the Jeep had hard, off-road suspension, it gave a very rough ride over the poorly maintained roads. Inevitably, the constant lurching and bumping eventually caused May Ling to begin labour and, no matter how carefully Siri drove to avoid the humps and potholes, she suffered miserably during the entire journey. It took over twelve hours to complete the four hundred miles to their destination, Moshi, on the southern slope of Kilimanjaro, where Siri was hoping that he would find Musab.

It was mid afternoon as they drove through the well populated outskirts of the town, and May Ling was whimpering between contractions, begging Siri to stop, desperate to get out of the jeep, anywhere, just to be out of the confining space of the vehicle.

Most of the inhabitants they passed were armed and dressed in traditional African or Arab dress, and the town had an odd feeling of belonging to an earlier time. There were street markets and small shops lining the route and the occasional inhabitant, who would look up from their task to stare at the distressed woman in the passing vehicle. They continued, without being challenged, until they were eventually stopped at a checkpoint on the Arush-Himo Road, leading into the town centre.

Four armed men cautiously approached the vehicle. May Ling was in considerable pain and, after the briefest scrutiny, Siri was gestured to follow their jeep; May Ling had run out of time and, with one of the guards sitting in the rear of their jeep, Siri obediently drove on.

They were led into the grounds of what had been the local golf course. It had been converted into the private gardens of a small but impressive, classically designed Arabic palace which had been recently built at its centre. To one side of the building, two orderlies with a hospital trolley were waiting for them, and May Ling was rushed to a medical facility contained within the palace.

This was all puzzling to Siri. He had expected some difficult questions and he was going to rely on his friendship with Musab to protect them but, in the event, this protection didn't appear to be required, and more than ever, he felt as if he was a pawn being manipulated in some mad game. May Ling; however, was in no condition to think about anything outside of her suffering. In the early stages of labour, the fear of losing her baby had filled her mind; she had never been so scared before in all her life. But now her world was filled with pain and she was reconciled to the fact that she was going to die.

On arrival in the medical centre, May Ling was hyperventilating but a large, and immensely kind, native midwife had quickly taken command of the situation. Within minutes May Ling had calmed, and within an hour of arriving, she had given birth to a healthy daughter who she immediately named as Jai. When Siri was allowed into the delivery room, he began to make some comments about not naming the child too early as it might not survive, but one withering look from the defensive mother put pay to any further doubts regarding Jai's future.

A few hours later, May Ling and Siri had been moved into a specious ward with a single bed. The afternoon sun was sending bright shafts of light, accompanied by birdsong, through the arched ornate windows and, in spite of the unusual circumstances, for the time being at least, all seemed well with the world.

Jai was in her cot beside the bed and Siri was stroking May Lings hand and telling her how proud he was of his beautiful wife and daughter, when May Ling was startled. A man, in traditional Arab dress, had appeared and was approached the new family from the sunlit side of the room. He was unrecognisable, as his face was obscured by the glare of the sun and by the long shadow he was casting over them. A chill passed through May Ling, and Siri stood and blocked the strangers path.

The stranger spoke.

'Indeed it is you, Siri, you old devil. And this lovely lady needs no introduction. Supervisor May Ling. And I see you have a small gift from God with you.'

‘Musab?’ Siri exclaimed.

‘Indeed it is I,’ said Musab.

‘Am I glad to see you,’ said Siri and, turning to May ling, he said.

‘May Ling, allow me to introduce Sultan Ul-Mujahidin although, when I first met him, he was Musab Ibn Umayr.’

May Ling was far from pleased to meet this stranger and made no attempt to hide her animosity.

‘I’m sorry,’ said May Ling, ‘but it wasn’t my idea to seek asylum from an enemy who may well be connected to the destruction of my city and the deaths of countless numbers of my fellow citizens.’

Musab approached the bed and knelt on one knee in front of May Ling and replied, ‘Please be assured Madam Supervisor, my organisation was not responsible for your misfortune. I swear that on my honour and the innocence of your new-born son.’

‘Daughter,’ corrected Siri, ‘her name is Jai.’

‘Daughter? Oh, more misfortunes on you Siri; you have my sympathy.’

In spite of his jibe about daughters, such was his charm and sincerity, that May Ling felt compelled to believe him, which betrayed her ignorance. Lies are quite permissible when told to non-believers, especially in the defence of Islam. However, under the circumstances, she had little choice but to relent and, for the time being at least, observe good manners. She would reserve her judgement until a time when she was less vulnerable.

‘Please get up Sultan Ul-Muja -’

‘Just Musab, please, I am embarrassed by my assumed title, as Siri no doubt intended.’

Siri moved towards his old friend and they embraced.

‘Musab, my friend, thank you. This is the second time you have me in your debt.’

‘When I heard who was at my door seeking sanctuary, at first I could not believe it; a Chinese adversary and my dearest old friend from England. Much has changed in the world but here you are and welcome.’

He turned to May Ling and held out his hand, and she felt compelled to return the gesture.

‘It seems likely that we owe you a great deal, Musab, and I have to give you the benefit of the doubt that you had no part in the atrocity at Lake Victoria. Thank you for your protection.’

‘Thank you for your generosity, May Ling, and you are most welcome,’ said Musab, as he took her hand and surprised her by, not shaking it, but by lightly kissing it.

‘There is; however, one small but inescapable problem. You are both sinners in the eyes of God and must marry as soon as it can be arranged, or I will be forced to expel you from this sanctuary under the protection of God.’

May Ling looked accusingly at Siri.

‘Well, Professor Masters, when *were* you intending to make an honest woman of me?’

‘I didn’t think you approved of marriage,’ replied Siri.

‘You have done nothing but bring me pain and trouble,’ May Ling accused. ‘The least that you can do is *marry* me.’

Jai was waking and making small mewling noises, reaching out for her mother’s teat. In a softer tone, May Ling added, ‘But for the time being, I forgive you, and I think our daughter wants some attention.’

As Siri and May Ling became preoccupied with their new arrival, Musab decided that his first visit had extended for long enough.

‘Before I go and leave you two to make fools of yourselves over your child, I have something of yours that my men took when you arrived.’

Musab produced Hatch’s gun that Siri had been wearing in its holster beneath his robes.

‘Thank you Musab, I would hate to lose it. It was a gift from Hatch!’

‘He must have felt close to you for him to part with such a fine weapon and, no doubt, with sentimental value.’

‘Yes, I thought so. I think Hatch thought that it might bring me luck.’

Musab nodded in agreement.

‘I will go now and we will speak again, soon,’ and he turned and left the couple with their new addition.

Pre-dawn, the following morning, the sound of heavy gunfire and an explosion woke Siri and May Ling. He was unsure what to do until May Ling persuaded him that it would be safer to discover the cause, rather than wait in ignorance until events unfolded around them.

As Siri left the building, he could see a column of smoke rising over some buildings to one side of the palace grounds. He ran in that direction, dodging some emergency vehicles and, when he arrived at the source of the smoke, Musab and two bodyguards were examining the still burning wreck of a crashed drone aircraft.

Musab noticed Siri approaching and called out.

‘It’s nothing to worry about my friend.’

Siri joined them and he could see some Chinese lettering on the remains of a small plane.

‘What is it and what is it doing here?’ he asked.

‘It is a reconnaissance drone, and I have no idea!’ said Musab. ‘They can’t suspect us of having detonated the bomb, we don’t have the capability.’

‘But you have friends that do?’ said Siri.

Musab looked hurt and replied indignantly, ‘I don’t know who you could be referring to.’

‘Don’t play games; you know exactly what I’m driving at. It could be any one of several nuclear powers that would like to see the Chinese pushed out of Africa, and what a disaster it is. The restoration of the lake was going so well, and now we’ll have radioactive contamination from Superior to the Nile Delta for generations, to say nothing of the immediate casualties from the explosion, and during the years to come.’

Musab pondered his reply carefully before giving his response.

‘Siri, it was not my doing and there was nothing that I could have done to stop it.’

Siri replied.

‘Tens of thousands must have died and more will die in agony over the years to come, and it could have killed us, Musab, killed May Ling and the baby!’

‘Hardly, when you were both visiting your family over two hundred miles away.’

Siri became convinced that Musab had been involved, somehow, with the explosion, and he turned to face Musab, and asked, ‘How is it that you know of our movements, Musab.’ Do you know everything the Chinese are up to?’

‘Mostly, yes!’

Musab, seeing that he would have to give a convincing explanation, turned from the crash site, and beckoned Siri to follow him back to the palace.

‘I knew about it, yes, but the attack wasn’t authorized or even desired by me. I’ll explain but not now, it may take some time for an Infidel to understand, especially a stubborn one like you.’

Siri speculated.

‘Could someone have decided to provoke a nuclear exchange to bring about a nuclear winter?’

Musab placed a reassuring hand on Siri’s shoulder as he replied, ‘No! I am sure that a limited nuclear war is not desired by any of the major players. That is not to say that creating a nuclear winter has been completely discounted, but not by random hostilities.’

Siri understood well enough the theory of detonating a series of controlled explosions, in an attempt to throw sufficient dust particles into the upper atmosphere to bring about a rapid cooling of the planet. Musab was right though, a random exchange would be unreliable and, possibly, counter productive.

They entered the building and faced each other before returning to their respective accommodation.

‘We will talk soon and, when you do understand, you will help me.’

Siri replied, ‘You may hold me in your debt Musab, but if it involves people getting killed you can count me out!’

Musab chuckled.

‘You are an intelligent man that cares about the future of intelligent life on this planet, especially a certain brown baby girl with oriental eyes. You will help me,’ and he turned away leaving Siri confused and concerned about what Musab was up to.

Throughout his perilous travels across Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East and Africa, Siri had faced his dangers with the freedom of being alone, with no responsibilities other than to himself. Things were different now. With May Ling and Jai sharing his perils, maybe, for the first time in his life, he was truly frightened of the future.

After leaving the ward, the apartment given to Siri and May Ling was in a most opulent Arabic style. They had a large living room where two of the walls were pierced with rows of large, classical Islamic styled arches. These were topped with a mass of filigree work, and richly coloured and embroidered curtains which could either be drawn to cover them, or be drawn back to reveal a private first floor patio. This was edged with ornamental balustrades, beyond which lay the surrounding gardens of flowering trees and shrubs which were interspersed with numerous water features.

The following day, Musab invited Siri to visit his large stables where he kept four polo ponies, along with a few horses of various breeds. They fondly spoke of their time together re-enacting battles on horseback as two mounts were led up to them by a stable-hand. One was an American Quarter Horse, the other a beautiful palomino Arab. Both were all tacked up and ready to go.

Musab took the rein of the Palomino and, turning to Siri, he asked, ‘Coming then?’

Siri’s face broke into a huge grin.

‘Try to stop me!’ he said, and eagerly mounted the Quarter Horse, and he was delighted to find it had a western saddle.

Musab effortlessly leaped astride his smaller mount, which was equipped with a rifle that hung to the fore of his right leg. Both animals were carrying a pair of saddle bags.

Initially the trek up Kilimanjaro was exhilarating and, after the first ten miles, they began to leave the barren slower slopes and reach a cooler altitude where some patches of forestation remained.

They saw no wildlife, as all the larger species had long since been killed for food.

Following the deforestation of the mountain, the rainfall had almost ceased and the human population was generally thought to have either died of famine, or had left to seek out a living elsewhere. Even so, Siri could see signs that people were still actively hunting and gathering what food remained.

Smaller, drought hardy species of plants and trees were spreading over the land where the tropical rain forests had once stood and, in time, they could once again build up a healthy covering of soil over the eroded land to allow larger trees to inhabit the mountain. But, it was unlikely that Kilimanjaro would ever return to the glory that it had once been, and supply the surrounding land and wildlife in Tanzania and Kenya with the flowing rivers that had once been their lifeblood.

Siri returned from their trek deep in thought and in sadness for both the mountain and the wildlife that had suffered there. It would be easy to blame the people, but they had not been responsible for destroying the sustainable self-supporting communities that had inhabited Sub Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, they had been the ones to pay the price. Even the Maasai, who had resisted the degenerating effects of civilisation, were now suffering. Siri could see now, more clearly than ever before, that civilisation was the worst kind of parasite; it created the deepest dependency within its victims who remained completely unaware of their servitude.

On their return, Musab said, 'We must go again soon - it is good to get above the dust and heat of the savannah.'

Siri shook his head.

'Maybe it is different for me. I remember the mountain when it was still green. Now, it's like visiting the graveyard of an old friend.'

Musab laughed.

'Come now, dear me, why so negative when you have seen so much destruction? The mountain is still here and will recover one day, or not, as Allah wishes.'

'Maybe it is different for you, a desert fox. To you the mountain very likely seems like a blessed oasis.'

A week had passed and it was late evening. May Ling was in Siri's arms on a huge oriental couch as they watched the night sky which was adorned with the stars of the Milky Way. Jai was sleeping nearby, and a large table was covered with many dishes of fruit and sweetmeats and crystal decanters filled with colourful drinks. Anything more they needed was available, just for the asking, but recent events had made them prisoners.

Musab had visited them earlier that day for the first time following the trek on Kilimanjaro and, while Siri and May Ling had been sitting on their couch, Musab had paced up and down enthusiastically waving his arms about while explaining his vision for the future of mankind.

He had started with an apology.

'I am sorry that you have been left here without an explanation of what is happening, but the world is changing and I, along with many others, have been attempting to ensure that it is a change for the better.'

Siri and May Ling said nothing, but patiently waited for Musab to continue.

'The Koran tells us that there will be a final, devastating battle between good and evil and that, with God's help, good will prevail. I think we can safely say that, The End of Days, or, Armageddon has begun and, for the first time in well over a century, we now have a sustainable human population that can be supported on our planet. But the unholy, the Illuminate elite, who would return us to the wicked ways of the past, are still in control of much of the Earth, and we have a state of cold war between the major powers as they scramble for land and mineral resources.

'The whole cycle will begin again and we will eventually be faced with the same situation regarding wars, overpopulation and the over use of the Earth's resources leading to another bout of genocide by the empowered minority in order to save themselves. Fortunately, there is another option; however, this will require humanity to be controlled.

‘This control should be enforced from within the individual by the certainty that, if the rules are broken, the offender will be held to account. In fact, he needs to understand that he is being observed at all times, throughout the day and night; even his thoughts cannot be kept from a higher authority. There cannot be anywhere to hide from discovery and there cannot be any possibility of escape from the consequences of his wrongdoings.

‘Societies of this kind have always existed, some for good and some for evil. In the past these disciplines have successfully controlled the excesses of Kings and even Emperors. But, for centuries, mankind has been dominated by those serving evil which has finally resulted in the destruction of much of civilisation.

‘The time has come for this evil to be cleansed from the Earth and for the Earth to be, once again, placed into the compassionate and merciful hands of the omnipresent, all seeing and all knowing one true God.

‘The battle has not yet been won and it is the duty of all righteous men to join in the effort to establish God’s law and finally bring about the justice and peace promised to his believers.’

Musab had finished his monologue, and stood, eagerly waiting for a reaction from his audience. However, Siri and May Ling didn’t know how to respond, they were waiting for some sort of conclusion.

Siri was still for a while but then, in spite of trying to control himself, he began to laugh. The other two said nothing but waited for Siri to recompose himself and, when he had, Siri stood and, still smiling, he took a step toward Musab.

‘That’s your revelation for the salvation of mankind then is it, Musab? I think you’ll find it’s been tried before.’

Musab couldn’t help but smile himself, but he was also shaking his head.

‘I suspected that you might be sceptical,’ which only made Siri’s smile broaden.

‘Sorry Musab,’ Siri apologised, ‘I didn’t mean any disrespect but, surely, you don’t expect the world to adopt Sharia law, because I assume that’s what you are proposing?’

‘I am deadly serious Siri. Think about your own conclusions in TBOS. You state that a sustainable future for mankind depends on limiting the number of high energy consumers and maximizing the proportion of the population living simpler, sustainable, low-energy lifestyles. A consumer society has the false god of acquisition of material wealth through competition but, for individuals to be content in a society impoverished of material wealth, they need a spiritual wealth, a meaningful and just existence. In return for obedience, this is provided by God.’

Siri sighed.

‘But, Musab, what you describe sounds very much like Gnosticism, an early Christian concept, not Islamic theology.’

‘No, Siri. Gnostic principles predate Christianity by thousands of years. It is the rejection of the material world in favour of oneness with God. However, this was indeed the teaching of the prophet Isa, known as Jesus in Christianity. Isa was the fan that was intended to light the spark of God within the Jews and find everlasting life but, as we know, the Jews continued to worship the devil and the material world and have brought humanity to ruin.’

Siri raised his hand to stop Musab and, looking him straight in the eye, he warned, ‘You do realise that you are putting yourself, and Islam, in a head to head situation with the most powerful, wealthy and resourceful people? You will be killed!’

‘Possibly,’ replied Musab, ‘But martyrdom is to be welcomed, if that is the will of God.’

May Ling, having lived in a secular society, thought that he was talking absolute rubbish but, nevertheless, she found herself feeling pity for Musab, and she tried to reason with him.

‘But surely, religion must adapt as cultures, civilizations change?’ she suggested.

Musab fervently replied.

‘How can this be for a true believer? What you are suggesting is that God is fallible and, from time to time, finds it necessary to change his mind.’

Siri chipped in.

‘Well, isn’t this the purpose of prophets, being the messengers of God? Through them, God delivers the necessary refinements to his laws as and when he sees fit.’

‘Indeed it has been so,’ said Musab. ‘But these refinements, as you describe them, would be better termed as guidances. And, as Muhammad is the last Prophet, no further guidance is necessary.’

‘It is for mankind to obey the infallible law of God. It is not for God to obey the often misguided and degenerate laws of mankind. It is that mistake, by Christians, Hindus and Jews, that has brought us to chaos!’

Musab had got into his stride and he paced up and down the room gesticulating to an imaginary wider audience.

‘Muhammad is the last and true prophet of Allah. Only Muhammad remains true to the teachings of God and demands the following of God’s laws; keeping the banks, merchants and politicians in check; women, and the troubles they create, under control, and punishing the blasphemers and heretics. For he is a jealous god, a vengeful god who tolerates no unbelievers in his flock, thereby maintaining good order and avoiding the disastrous fate that befalls all those who stray from the prescribed path of righteousness.’

Siri and May Ling looked towards each other with looks of concern, and May Ling silently mouthed, ‘He’s mad!’

Bearing in mind that they were dependent upon Musab’s friendship for protection, Siri frowned a look of caution, and then questioned Musab again.

‘So, what exactly is it that you imagine I can do that will be of the slightest help in the establishment of God’s law? I assume that’s where all this is going Musab.’

‘I want you to persuade Hatch to allow our forces to assume control of the Nile Delta and help in the retaking of the Suez Canal!’ Musab stated, eagerly, like a boy scout asking his friend to spend some time out camping in the woods.

Siri had delayed giving a decision right away by diplomatically telling Musab that he had given him a lot to think about, which was

true, although not in the way that Musab imagined. This had all occurred several hours before, and Siri and May Ling were in each others arms as they sat in a cane sofa upon their first floor patio.

‘What will you do?’ asked May Ling.

‘I don’t know; he’s right about so many things but, even if I was prepared to ask Hatch to betray his country, he’d never do it. And I wouldn’t want him to, it’s a crazy idea!’

They sat in silence and watched the night sky and, for a while, it seemed that their Earthly troubles had disappeared, until Siri restarted their discussion.

‘I don’t believe the US would ever abandon the Nile Delta, as long as it remained capable of producing food for them, and certainly not the Suez Canal. They still maintain over half of their pre 2050 population and, even after securing their southern borders and encroaching into Canada, they need to import supplies of food and minerals. In the future, if the predicted advancing ice from the north occurs, they’ll have an even greater dependency on imports.’

‘But what of the radiation from Victoria,’ asked May Ling, ‘it will eventually reach the Delta and contaminate their food. Won’t that make it a worthless wasteland?’

‘Possibly, but I suspect, judging from the massive level of blast destruction, that it was a low-level radiation detonation, and people aren’t as fussy as they used to be. The fear of leukaemia, still births and babies with extra appendages won’t make people starve.’

May Ling returned to their own predicament.

‘Maybe, but right now we appear to be prisoners of a tyrannical, idealistic lunatic.’

‘That’s a bit strong,’ said Siri. ‘We’re not imprisoned, and I wouldn’t call Musab a lunatic.’

‘Wouldn’t you? Think about it, is it likely that China is ignorant of what’s going on here? After that attack on City Victoria there will be reprisals; when they decide who’s to blame. And, even if the Brotherhood were completely innocent of any involvement with the attack, they might choose to remove this Islamic irritant once and for all before renewing their activities in the region, even if they have to level Kilimanjaro.

‘And the US.’ They may be many things, but they aren’t stupid when it comes to protecting their interests. You’ve lived there, what action do you think they will take in order to protect the Delta?’

Siri shook his head in despair at the thought.

‘The US authorities would reduce troublesome regions to a sheet of glass, if it appeared to them to be the most effective way to protect their interests.’

‘You may be right,’ said May Ling. ‘But there are many ways to achieve a goal. You may be a leading figure in your field of science, Siri, but you are no politician. I think it more likely that the US would try to manipulate another power into doing their dirty work for them, maybe the Chinese.’

‘You think it may have been the Americans that were behind the attack on City Victoria?’ Siri asked in disbelief. ‘If that’s true, Musab must be in some sort of subterfuge with the US.’

He held his head in his hands at the madness of it all.

‘If so, he’s playing a dangerous game, May Ling. Save me from politics.’

May Ling encircled him with her arms and rested her head on his shoulder.

‘Oh, Siri, where are we to go? I want to be free of all this intrigue as well. I just want us three to be happy together.’

Siri raised his head and looked levelly at May Ling.

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure an answer will come to us, but I think that we need to view today from the other side of a good night’s sleep.’

The following day, Siri stood before Musab who was sitting behind a heavy, leather topped desk, in a large study that was furnished in a similar fashion to Siri and May Ling’s suite of rooms. The wall hangings were drawn back to reveal a brightly sun lit morning, and ornate patterns were projected across the room through the filigree windows.

Musab looked up from his work and, unlike the previous day, he was quite distant. Something had changed in their relationship which made Siri feel uncomfortable.

‘Good morning Siri,’ said Musab. ‘I trust that you and your lady had a good nights sleep?’

Siri answered uncertainly.

‘Yes, our quarters are without doubt the finest that I’ve ever had the pleasure to occupy. You are an impeccable host Musab.’

‘I thank you for the compliment, Siri, but it is of no consequence. I thank God that I have wealth and servants to carry out the menial tasks, without which a man can never be truly free. But what of my request?’

Siri didn’t know where this conversation was going to end up, but he owed his friend an honest reply.

‘I’m sorry Musab, but I won’t be assisting you with your plan, whatever that is. In fact, I would like to try to dissuade you from taking any action against the delta which, as you know, I believe would almost certainly result in your death.’

Musab didn’t look surprised or offended; rather, he seemed disappointed when he replied.

‘I can’t say that I was holding out much hope, but are you threatening me, Siri?’

Siri brushed aside such a stupid notion and went on the offensive.

‘I don’t know exactly what you’re up to, Musab, but I want you to give it up. I think you may be juggling with more fire than you realize.’

Musab raised his eyebrows as he stood and walked around the desk to stand in front of Siri.

‘You have done well with May Ling. She is very intelligent, for a woman. But, as her father was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China at the time of her conception, it would be surprising if she were not politically astute.’

‘I’m sorry?’ said Siri.

‘Didn’t you know?’ said Musab, retaking the initiative. ‘She hasn’t told you? She belongs to a very influential family in Hong Kong. This treason she has committed would not go well for her if she falls back into the hands of the Chinese, or her family.’

‘You listened to our conversation last night!’

‘Some of it and, although I am bitterly disappointed that you will not be willingly joining me in my task, I am much relieved that you have not tried to deceive me. But you will have to stay here for the time being, regardless of the outcome of this conversation, now that you know my intentions.

If it were just you, it might be different, but May Ling remains a loyal Chinese citizen and I can not take the risk of being betrayed.’

This turn of events annoyed Siri.

‘So, you have made us your prisoners!’

‘I hardly think you could describe your situation as being imprisoned. Besides, where else can you go? The reality is that, whilst you are here, you are being protected.’

Musab was meticulously correct in his assessment of Siri’s situation, and it irked him. He turned to leave but Musab stopped him.

‘Do I need to remind you of the oath that you gave me. That, should I need help, you would assist me in return for helping your people defend their land?’

Siri turned back.

‘Surely you are not seriously thinking that I can be held by a drunken promise I made thirty-five years ago?’ Musab raised his eyebrows to confirm that he did indeed expect just that.

‘You can’t pull that one out of the bag and expect me to comply,’ said Siri, astonished by Musab’s expectations.

‘I made a point of explaining the terms of our agreement at the time, and you had ample opportunities to cancel our arrangement during the months leading up to the attack.

‘All I am asking is that you talk to Hatch and explain the situation, and the terms that I can offer. I would go, but that would be expecting too much of Hatch’s powers of protection. You; however, could be my emissary, and remain free to return and rejoin your wife and child with the minimum of risk.’

‘If you are threatening my family, Musab, I have no choice -’

Musab interrupted.

‘What do think I am, Siri? Your family will be protected here as if they were my own, regardless of your decision.

‘Let me make it a little clearer. I have information that a second nuclear attack will be made but, this time, over the Delta. It is not in my power to stop it but, if your mission was successful, we could save Hatch and thousands of other lives and avoid the senseless destruction of property.

‘You should be viewing my offer as an opportunity to save your... our friends life, and there is not much time.’

Siri was left speechless. He had no doubts that Musab was being truthful and, even if he was being manipulated, he had no choice but to agree.

‘Go back to May Ling, think about what I have said, and let me know your decision but, don’t leave it too long, time is getting short.

‘Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do; tyrant in the making, all that sort of thing. Oh, and leave the gun on the desk please Siri; you do understand I hope.’

‘Yes Musab, of course,’ and Siri unbuckled the gun belt and placed it on the desk.’

‘One more thing, see the Imam and make some arrangements for your marriage, seriously. I don’t want to fall out with you two over something neither of you consider important but, if you don’t sort something out soon, I will have to move you out into separate suites.’

‘Right, thanks, I think,’ said Siri. And he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him and feeling overwhelmed by the task ahead and its implications.

Back in their suite, May Ling was sitting next to Jai’s cot when Siri returned from his meeting with Musab. She jumped up and hurriedly walked over to him, worried by his concerned expression.

‘What happened,’ she asked?

Siri put his finger up to his lips for silence, and then pointed around the room to indicate that they were being overheard. Then he beckoned her out onto the patio. She followed, and they both stood together, leaning against the ornamental balustrade and looking out across the gardens.

‘What happened,’ whispered May Ling?

‘Musab is involved in some sort of African power struggle. I believe him when he denies responsibility for the attack on Victoria but, although he hasn’t named them, he’s perfectly aware of who’s behind it and almost certainly in league with them.’

Siri’s words and demeanour had frightened May Ling and she said, ‘We must leave, now!’

‘He won’t let us. We’re being protected but, never the less it’s a prison and we’re being bugged. He knows about our conversation last night.’

They both remained silent for a while, each immersed in their own thoughts as they gazed across the palace gardens. It was an oasis of lawns, pools and fountains surrounded by ornamental flowering shrubs and trees. During daylight, brightly coloured birds drifted through the treetops and filled the day with song.

May Ling was the first to speak.

‘How did he take it when you told him that you wouldn’t go to the delta?’

‘He left me to consider my decision for a while longer, but I have to go.’

‘For pities sake, why,’ May Ling retorted?

Siri related the whole conversation to her and she could hardly contain her rage at Musab’s duplicity.

‘So he lied. He *was* behind the attack on Victoria!’ she pronounced.

‘No, I don’t think so. Musab is a small fish in all of this. Whoever is responsible had to have access to the very latest military technology to be able to launch an attack on such a well defended target. This has to be way above anything Musab and the Brotherhood are capable of.’

May Ling concentrated her mind onto the puzzle.

‘If you go to your friend, Hatch, and tell him about an imminent attack, he will simply thank you for the information and report to his superiors. They will then arrange for additional protection. Stationary satellites, a concentration of ground to air defences would make it impossible to attack the Delta from the air, and Musab must realise that. Which means that, either your trip

would be a waste of time, or a distraction and, if a nuclear strike was successful, who would gain from excluding the US from the Delta at the cost turning it into a wasteland?

‘It just doesn’t make any sense. None of it does, or what happened at Victoria’

Siri interrupted her train of thought.

‘Whatever the truth is, I have to go. And one more thing, he has ordered us to get married or live in separate apartments.’

‘When will you be leaving?’

‘Very soon!’

May Ling led Siri back into the apartment and produced a small silk bag from an ornamental trinket box. He recognised it as the one he delivered to May Ling from Ho. She opened the draw strings and tipped out a gold ring with a jade stone setting, surrounded with dozens of small diamonds.

Holding the ring up into the light, she admired it for a moment before reaching out and taking his right hand. May Ling attempted to put it onto his third finger, but it was far too small. She then tried his left hand and, it just fitted. She then replaced the ring into the bag.

‘You and Ho?’ Siri asked.

‘Yes!’ replied May Ling. ‘We were to be married but, things didn’t go well between us.’

Siri waited to learn more.

‘If you must know, we were engaged and Ho had affairs.’

‘I see,’ replied Siri. ‘I’m sorry; Ho seemed to be nice enough.’

‘He was and, maybe, it was not entirely his fault. My priority has always been my career and it kept us apart for long periods of time, and he was only a typical, weak man after all.

‘He always wanted us to get together again but, by returning his engagement ring, it had to be a final gesture. Maybe he has moved on. I hope so.

‘You had better see your friend about finding something suitable to give to me. I assume that Islamic weddings involve the exchange of rings.’

‘No, I don’t believe they do,’ said Siri, ‘but I’m sure that it will be okay. I’ll see to it right now and explain to Musab that I can leave after the ceremony.’

‘Not immediately, I hope. I don’t mind waiting for a honeymoon, but I am *not* being deserted on my wedding night.’

After Siri reported to Musab the news of his intention to marry, and his agreement to visit Hatch, he returned to May Ling to deliver an unexpected condition.

‘We have to convert to Islam,’ he said, ‘otherwise we can’t marry, not here at any rate.’

This development was unexpected, and May Ling’s response was not at all favourable.

‘You can not be serious!’ she said. ‘If you are, then you had better start packing your bags and move out. You know how I feel about religions; all of them, let alone ones that engage in holy wars in the name of their god.’

Siri was surprised at the vehemence of her response.

‘Please, May Ling, think no more about it. There’s no need to do anything against your beliefs, or lack of them.’

‘Personally, I’m not troubled by the idea of converting to a fiction, and morality seems to be much the same in all religions. Also, I have nothing suitable to give you, and I would have to make a dowry gift of considerable value.’

‘As for you converting to Islam, as you are not an idolater, if *I* convert, we can probably still marry, provided that I promise to convert you over time.’

Siri knew that he wasn’t helping matters but he was beginning to be amused by the whole business; however, he could see that May Ling was *not* amused.

‘Just kidding,’ he quickly added. ‘But, seriously, what do *you* want us to do?’

May Ling sighed, and she reflected on their situation. Unwittingly, they had become fugitives from the US and the Chinese and were being protected by the Muslim Brotherhood. As she had no conviction about the existence of any god, whether it was

in the form of a man, woman, or had multiple arms or tentacles, logically, it should make little difference to her.

She finally decided.

‘Fine, provided that I am not expected to make any silly religious pledges.’

Siri looked distinctly uncomfortable as he answered.

‘No, I don’t think you have to say anything. In fact, from my limited understanding of Islam, you would not even need to be there; it would be more like an exchange of goods between someone acting as your father and myself, as the new owner.’

As Siri had been talking, he had moved nearer to the door. And, as he completed his last sentence, May Ling had grasped the nearest item at hand as Siri ducked out of the room. She was fuming, holding a valuable vase, and had been deprived of a target. It smashed as it struck the far wall.

May Ling later agreed to be married by an Islamic ceremony but, initially, she refused to be present or have any part in the proceedings. However, after additional consideration, she finally decided that she was most certainly going to attend her own wedding and, after being offered a hideously heavy and gloomy traditional Bedouin dress, Musab was able to produce a lovely cream coloured satin gown that softened her disapproval of the process.

At the ceremony, May Ling and Siri were standing in their own apartment with Musab and a small group of his community.

Musab began.

‘I give you the girl in my guardianship in marriage in accordance to the Islamic Shari’ah in the presence of the witnesses here with the dowry agreed upon. And Allah is our best witness.’

Siri replied, ‘I accept marrying your guard giving her name to myself in accordance to the Islamic Shari’ah in the presence of the witnesses here with the dowry agreed upon. And Allah is our best witness.’

‘I am happy to confirm that you are now permitted to continue to live together, no longer in sin but with the blessing of God,’ said Musab.

‘Not so bad after all, May Ling, yes? Now you can kiss, exchange rings and indulge in any other secular or heathen practise that pleases you.’

May Ling placed the adjusted jade and diamond ring on to Siri’s third finger on his right hand. It had been enlarged, as Musab would not hear of it being borne on the left hand, which is considered dirty. Siri likewise placed a gold ring, bearing a nine and a half carat, marquise cut red diamond, onto May Lings right hand.

May Ling had not previously seen the ring and she was transfixed. It was of great value and was a wedding gift from Musab to serve as her dowry.

Chapter XIX

MESSENGER OF GOD

Three days later, Siri was being met by one of Musab's agents as he disembarked from a light plane. It was well before dawn at a small landing strip near El-Bawiti, a town in the Bahariya Oasis in Egypt and around two hundred and twenty miles from Cairo. This was as close as Musab dared have an unauthorised plane approach the Nile without running the risk of it being shot down and, as soon as Siri's bike and equipment had been unloaded, the plane was refuelled and towed into a hanger as quickly as possible, before daylight revealed its identity to the watching satellites. The remainder of the journey, to Hatch's headquarters, would have to be made by trail bike, and it was at least a five hour journey to the north east.

After the first sixty miles, his route took him up out of the oasis and onto a relatively straight run along the old Cairo to Al Wahat Al Baharia Road. The terrain was completely flat with few features and, in many places, the encroaching desert had completely covered the roads surface, forcing Siri to press on, unguided, until it reappeared from beneath the wandering sand dunes. Strong winds, capable of completely changing the appearance of the desert, was a frequent condition and Siri was unfortunate to have encountered a storm, which forced him to take shelter inside an abandoned and rusted petrol tanker.

When he eventually arrived at the outer security fence of the Delta, he was completely obscured by dust, and the guards directed their weapons towards him and shouted, 'Yalla imshi,' meaning, Go, get out of here! But he removed his gun belt and held it aloft as he called out that he had to speak with Vice Admiral Hachet. They ordered him to lay the gun down and strip naked and, when he had complied, they waved him nearer and asked his name.

After contacting their headquarters, Siri's clothes were returned to him and, ten minutes later, a vehicle arrived to take Siri back to the security compound. His heart sank a little at the prospect

of being put through another ordeal with the cold, disinfectant laden, hose-down but, in the event, he was allowed to use a shower cubical where he could attend to his own hygiene.

‘Well this is a surprise,’ said Hatch as he entered his office where Siri had been waiting. ‘You can go now!’ he curtly addressed to Siri’s guard.

‘So, what’s new, I thought that you had retired to the Maasai Mara?’

‘That was the idea but, life got complicated!’

‘Mm, doesn’t it just.’

Hatch gestured for Siri to take a seat and he did the same, after pouring a couple of whiskeys with ice.

‘Lets cut the bull-crap, why are you here, Siri?’

Siri took a swallow and began.

‘Supposedly, to save your life!’

‘I have a message from Musab that he claims will explain everything.’ Siri produced an antiquated ‘datat’, a data transmitter the size of a pen-top, and handed it over to Hatch.

‘Lets see what the old devil has to say for himself then,’ said Hatch, and he addressed his PA.

‘Honey?’

A full size 3D facsimile of a native North African woman appeared.

‘Yes Hatch!’

‘Please run this datat for me, and treat the contents as hostile?’

‘Yes, Hatch, understood!’

He gave the drive a twist to activate it, and the image of the woman was replaced by one depicting Musab who, after greeting and apologising to Hatch, proceeded to repeat what he had previously explained to Siri.

Hatch deactivated the stick and tossed it onto his side table.

‘Nothing much more to go on there,’ he said, and he rose to get a couple of refills.

As Hatch poured out the whiskeys, he provided a piece of information that cast an entirely new light over the incident at Victoria.

‘The oddest thing is that, although the Chinese have refused to confirm or deny it, US intelligence is certain that the nuclear detonation was not an attack upon Victoria, but a malfunction of one of City Victoria’s own in-house weapons.’

As the implications of this sank in, Siri began to be filled with remorse. There was no reason for him and May Ling to leave Victoria, and they had implicated themselves as traitors by unnecessarily fleeing to Musab. Also, Musab had let them believe that he was somehow involved in the attack.

‘I have to go back to May Ling, right now,’ he said as he rose from his chair.

‘Hold on there just a minute,’ said Hatch. ‘You’ve managed to rush into enough trouble as it is by not thinking things through.’

Siri returned to his seat, and Hatch handed him his drink.

Hatch began to talk it through.

‘Fist, tell me everything that has happened to you, from the last time that we were together.’

Siri related, to the best of his ability, everything that he could remember from departing the delta. When he had finished, they both silently contemplated the possibilities; attempting to make sense of it all, until Hatch spoke.

‘Musab must realise that the detonation was self inflicted, and yet he chose to let you believe that it was an attack, and that another would be unleashed onto the Delta. You have to ask yourself why?’

Siri had no idea. He sat, waiting for Hatch to continue.

‘We have to consider the effect that your visit would have on the Delta. What changes, if any, would take place to the activity, the defences here, or elsewhere for that matter.’

Siri remembered his speculations with May Ling, ‘You would call in for extra defence to protect against an airborne attack!’

‘Right,’ agreed Hatch. ‘But there is no airborne attack, and a ground attack would be suicide. As I showed you, our defences against ground attacks are rock solid. No, he’s up to something else connected with the Delta.’

Siri’s head was mostly concerned with May Ling’s safety, he wanted to leave as soon as possible, which wasn’t making him of

much use to Hatch. However, a thought ran through his head which he spoke aloud.

‘Where would the additional defences come from?’

‘Oh,’ said Hatch, ‘they could easily redirect the tactical satellites from the North African coast and transfer some of the mobile ground to air units; however, that would leave the coastal installations more vulnerable to an airborne attack.’

Siri speculated again, ‘That would mean redirecting satellite observation away from the coast, wouldn’t it?’

‘Well, yes. They are an integral part of the system.’

Siri pursued the idea.

‘So, if there was a ground force threatening the north coast, they could go undetected until an attack had begun?’

‘Hardly,’ replied Hatch, ‘and even a surprise attack on the north coast installations would be futile. No, I just can’t see any advantage in sending you to see me,’ said Hatch.

Siri remembered Musab’s passion for chess.

‘It has to be a distraction tactic, but what are his real intentions?’

‘You go now, Siri, and get back to your wife. Tell Musab that you tried, but I refused to cooperate. I can’t see any point in you waiting any longer, unless you want to rest up overnight. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.’

‘No, but thanks anyway. I’m really worried about May Ling, and I want to get back as quickly as I Can,’ said Siri.

‘When you collect your stuff, the quartermaster will connect you up to a covert PA, so that we can keep in touch and, if you think of anything that might help, let me know.’

‘I could fit you out with a biojacket so that we could keep in touch and monitor your status, but I can’t see Musab being very happy about that.’

‘What will you do?’ Siri asked.

‘All I can do is ensure that security is as tight as a drum, and pass this information up the chain of command, along with my observations, and wait for further orders.’

Siri's property was returned to him, along with the PA that Hatch had promised, and he rejoined his plane for the journey back to Moshi.

After landing, he made his way directly to his apartment. It was empty and, after searching the palace and the gardens, he eventually found May Ling beside the palace's large, ornamental swimming pool. She was lying on a sun recliner with Jai's carry-cot and an exotic looking cocktail at her side. There were several other people there, either swimming or lounging, and some were obviously security guards trying to blend into the scenery.

Siri kissed his wife on the forehead, and when she opened her eyes and saw who her assailant was, she rewarded his affection with a huge smile. She raised her arms to encompass his neck and pull him down to return his kisses.

He sat beside her and, after assuring each other that all was well, Siri recounted all the events that had occurred during his encounter with Hatch.

'What a fool I have been,' said May Ling, when Siri had completed his report. 'Cant you see? The malfunction and explosion at Victoria could well have been due to a cyber attack and, although you may think that Hatch's firewall would be adequate, it is possible that Musab's little message could have opened a back door to a more powerful incursion. Siri, we need to get away from here as soon as possible! Have you seen Musab?'

'No, I came directly here,' Siri replied. 'He'll let me know when he wants to see me, but it seems as if I'll have already served my purpose.'

'May Ling, why is it that human beings are incapable of learning from their mistakes?'

May Ling had heard it all before and didn't reply. After a pause, he continued.

'Life doesn't progress, it simply endures. Life really is nothing more than elaborate chemistry.'

This time, May Ling couldn't resist responding.

'I see, so I am just *Elaborate Chemistry* now, am I?'

Siri turned to look at his wife.

‘Maybe, but I’ll need to devote my remaining years observing you at close quarters in order to be certain.’

She gave him a playful slap and, at that moment, Musab chose to appear.

‘I do hope that I am not the cause of your disagreement,’ Musab said, alerting the couple to his presence.

Siri quickly adjusted his thoughts before replying.’

No, Musab, not at all!’

Musab smiled briefly at Siri’s reassurance and continued.’

Firstly, Siri, you have my thanks for the success of your mission, and you can certainly consider your debt to me paid in full, and I thought it would be only right to personally bring you news of your success.’

Siri’s heart sank at hearing this comment. What had he unwittingly done? He waited in silence for Musab to continue.

‘That little datat stick was the key to turning attention away from the generating plants across the entire southern coast of the Mediterranean. By overriding the security system, and returning false information of normality, we have been able to commandeer them, without any fatalities.

‘After packing them with explosives, the US has been forced to agree to the return of ownership of the delta, and the Suez Canal, back under the authority of a reinstated Egyptian government. Similarly, the generating plants will also be placed under the jurisdiction of their respective host nations.

‘For all practical purposes though, things will continue much as before apart from, in future, the US will be making regular payments to the rightful owners for the energy and produce sourced in North Africa. A bloodless coup d’état, and it couldn’t have been accomplished without your help, Siri.’

‘Bloodless?’ shouted May Ling as she rose in seething anger. ‘Do you call what you did to Victoria *bloodless*?’

‘No, of course not! I am sorry May Ling but, as I have said before, that was out of my control. I can not say more except that the resources to regain control of our sovereignty in the north came at a price. Please do not judge me too harshly, I did everything within

my power to avoid the incident at Victoria, but there are interested parties that wish to reduce the presence of the US, and China in Africa. I can say no more.

‘What of Hatch,’ asked Siri?

‘To the best of my knowledge, Hatch will remain at his post in the delta. The only change will be that he will be second in command under an Egyptian commanding officer.’

Siri and May Ling were deeply shocked by the turn of events, and they made no further attempt to respond.

‘I will leave you two now. I can see that you have a lot to talk about.’

‘Any time you need me, you know where I am and, Siri, you are welcome to keep your pistol, you are not prisoners here and can come and go as you wish, after all, we *are* on the same side.’

Siri and May Ling sat quietly for some time. It was May Ling that first spoke.

‘We really do need to leave!’

‘I agree,’ said Siri.

‘But where can we go that will be safe?’ said May Ling. ‘Maybe I could arrange for us to be reinstated at Victoria, and they will still need your expertise, if they intend to restore the lake and surrounding land.’

‘Hatch might take us in. After all, if the Egyptian government are now in control, any complaint from the US might be ignored, although we would be vulnerable to rendition and imprisonment.’

They both sat for a while, each immersed in their own contemplation, regarding how the turn of events had further imprisoned them.

‘I need to activate the PA and try again to contact Hatch and see what he thinks.’

May Ling nodded and whispered, ‘Okay,’ but without any enthusiasm.

They had discovered that Musab had built a replica English Victorian park, complete with bandstand and a pavilion, a few miles further up the mountain overlooking the savannah. They made no secret of their intentions to picnic there and, a few days later, they

were overlooking the Maasai Mara from a restored nineteenth century cast iron park bench. Irrigation water maintained the lawns and a selection of trees, which was in stark contrast to the surrounding land which was parched and treeless. Jai was in a baby sling on Siri's lap which he was gently rocking, and an armed security guard was working at a nearby flower border, with a hoe, attempting to be mistaken as a gardener.

Siri eventually decided to act. He clutched his stomach and headed toward the pavilion. The would-be gardener took one glance but, seeing Siri clutching his stomach, he gave an understanding smile and returned to his weeding.

Siri entered the pavilion and locked himself in one of toilet cubicles. Then, squeezing through the window, he walked out of the park, into the bush until he found a secluded spot. Activating his PA, the call was answered. It was pre-recorded.

'Siri, if you are still at Moshi, get out of there immediately. Musab has played a double game and the people behind the cyber attack are not happy. If Musab is still there, he is a walking dead man. Destroy the PA, it can be tracked, and get out while you can. Take care, old buddy!'

Siri, deeply shaken, returned to May Ling. After relating Hatch's message to her and, without any further conversation, they prepared to leave the park and follow Hatch's advice in any way possible.

Siri noticed that the gardener had one hand to the side of his head and, after a moment, he abruptly lowered his hand and purposely made his way towards them. Two more men seemed to appear from nowhere and, as they drew closer, an armoured vehicle arrived and pulled up beside the bench.

'Come this way please, quickly!' ordered the erstwhile gardener.

Siri and May Ling said nothing. It was obvious that the guards wouldn't tolerate any delay or discussion, and they both climbed into the vehicle with May Ling carrying Jai in her sling.

After the short journey from the park, the vehicle pulled up outside the main entrance of Musab's palace, and Jai chose that

moment to become upset. The men had left the vehicle and were standing, impatiently waiting for them to follow. But Jai was inconsolable, and May Ling and Siri were still in the vehicle attempting to settle her, when there was a tremendous blinding flash and a deafening explosion from the palace. The vehicle was lifted and thrown sideways across the road, ending up against a garden wall amid a bombard of rubble, smoke and dust. Stunned, and completely disorientated, Siri and May Ling groped for each other in the darkness created by the dust cloud. Once satisfied that Jai was unhurt, and having checked each other for injuries, they clung to each other with their baby between them in the back of the vehicle, thankful for still being alive.

Siri remembered Musab.

‘Wait here,’ he said, ‘I have to find Musab.’

May Ling reached out to stop him.

‘Don’t go Siri. You don’t have to go in there, you will be killed!’

‘I have to, May Ling, but I will be as quick as I can and, if I can’t find Musab in his living quarters, I will immediately return, I promise!’

He stepped out from the armoured vehicle. There were no signs of the guards, or any other living thing. An entire section of the palace wall was missing with thick smoke pouring out from within. The building had lost the central dome and much of the remaining roof and, as he looked around, it was obvious that several other explosions had occurred nearby.

‘I’m not staying here. I’m coming with you,’ called May Ling through the open door.

‘No.’ insisted Siri. ‘Close the door and stay with Jai, there might be another explosion.’

For once, May Ling didn’t argue.

‘Okay but be careful!’ she agreed, and she closed the door to wait anxiously for him to return.

He headed on into the ruined palace, where several fires were raging amongst the wreckage. Making his way through fallen

timbers and broken furniture, he finally arrived at Musab's wrecked study and began to search for his friend.

He found him, crumpled on the floor in a pool of blood behind his desk with a splinter of wood protruding from his chest. Siri folded his jacket and carefully placed it beneath Musab's head, which was unrecognisable from blood and lacerations.

Siri knelt beside him.

'Siri, is that Siri?' Musab asked through a mouthful of blood.

'Yes, don't talk, save your strength. You'll be alright. Help is coming,' lied Siri.

The remnants of Musab's face creased into a smile and he replied.

'You always were a useless liar, Sironka Masters. I'm finished; it was not the will of God. Have I been a fool?'

'No Musab, you are no fool!'

'Hold me Siri.'

Siri sat down beside Musab, then lifted his upper body and cradled him against his chest.

Musab coughed up some blood before he could continue to speak, but much more quietly.

'Hold me Siri, I feel... *lā ilāha illā l-Lāh, Muḥammadun rasūlu l-Lāh.*' (*There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger.*)

Musab went into convulsions.

A few moments later, the convulsions stiffened into spasm before Musab became limp and still.

Siri lowered his friend back to the floor and stood, gazing down at the body.

A heavy gold chain hung around Musab's neck, and Siri stooped to remove it and put it around his own. Hanging from it was a round cabochon jewel in an elaborate gold setting.

'To remember you, old friend. You meant well enough, and I hope that you find your god, and are judged to have been a good man.'

The fires had spread into the study and, remembering his situation, Siri stood and made his way back through the smoke and flaming debris to the outside of the palace. As he emerged from the

smoke into the sunlight, May Ling rushed over from the vehicle and they embraced. They were both in tears, one in relief and the other in sorrow.

Help had arrived in the form of emergency trucks and personnel, but they ignored Siri and May Ling in their efforts to deal with the rapidly spreading fire.

‘Did you find him?’ May Ling asked.

‘Yes!’ replied Siri. ‘He’s with his god now.’

‘I’m sorry, he was your friend.’

‘It doesn’t mater any more,’ said Siri. ‘We have to get away from here before Musab’s men reorganise and start to ask questions.’

‘Where are we to go, Siri? They are all the same, quite mad; I don’t trust any of them.’

‘Maybe, but we need to provide a home and future for Jai.’

He recovered his PA from his pocket and looked down at the small plastic device that weighed so little and, yet, weighed so heavily on recent events. It was still activated.

‘If they thought we were dead, we might have a better chance,’ he said and, walking the short distance to the burning wreckage of the palace, he threw it into the flames.

Returning to May Ling, he surmised.

‘That might create some doubt about our survival, and now, we really must go. We could try to find my family in the Savannah.’

The area was now full of personnel, some of which were giving the couple suspicious looks. None of the would be rescuers had succeeded in getting past the flames into the palace and, with a roaring sound, the flames suddenly shot out of the doors and windows.

Siri took May Ling’s arm and he led her away from the commotion.

She asked him, ‘But would we be safe with your family, and would Jai be able to survive in the Maasai Mara?’

Siri replied.

‘Jai is half Maasai and, from what I’ve seen, the Chinese are a pretty tough breed. I would say that they are tougher than Europeans, you should be okay.’

May Ling scowled.

‘You mean, the Chinese lived in the dirt like peasants more recently!’

Siri smiled at her pride.

‘Most likely, and your skin is better suited to exposure to the sun, but we would have to find hats for both of you. Straight hair is very beautiful, but it is useless against the savannah sun.’

‘Oh Siri, anything, I just want some sort of normality, if you can call traipsing around the savannah, tripping over the dung left by your next meal, normality.’

They skirted the palace and arrived at the stable block. The ponies and horses were beginning to panic, as they were within a few dozen yards of the palace, and the smoke was occasionally billowing in their direction. While May Ling stood, with Jai in her sling, and looking in horror at the animals, Siri found two saddles and reins for two of Musab’s American Quarter Horses. He began to saddle up, and May Ling exclaimed, ‘No way am I getting on one of those. Why can’t we take a vehicle?’

‘It’s ride or walk,’ said Siri. ‘Vehicles are too easily traced, and if were caught trying to take one, well, without Musab’s protection, who knows what would happen to us.’

As Siri continued to tack up their mounts, May Ling sagged in defeat. It seemed to her that, just as she had decided that there was nothing more that this man could do to her to make her miserably uncomfortable, he had come up with another form of torture.

As soon as he had finished tacking up the horses, he found some heavy-duty adhesive tape and, after taking Jai in her baby-sling, May Ling helped him to tape it securely against his chest. Then, leading the horses to a mounting block, he helped May Ling up on to the saddle.

As he lifted her, he could feel her trembling and he asked with concern, ‘You can ride, can’t you May Ling?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied, ‘I have never tried!’

Siri's heart sank, the animals were wonderfully well trained, but they were not ideal for a beginner at the best of times, and they were now very agitated and were likely to bolt at the first opportunity from the smoke and noise of the burning palace.

Siri calmly instructed her.

'Just wrap your fingers in its mane and do nothing.'

With Jai strapped to his chest, and the reins of his horse in one hand and May Ling's in the other, Siri mounted and thanked God for his riding experience with Hatch and Musab of long ago.

The animals were skittish, and May Ling was almost hysterical before they succeeded in putting a safe distance between them and the palace. As they made their way around the back of Moshi and the ruined suburbs, the going was rough but, eventually, they were clear of the town, and Siri couldn't help feeling very pleased with himself.

He looked up and shouted to the sky.

'What do you think to that for horsemanship, then, Musab, eh? Pretty damn good, I reckon!'

May Ling snapped at him, 'Siri, you fool, do you want to bring trouble on to us?'

He stopped and turned his mount to see how she was managing. She looked pale and terrified and said nothing, until Siri opened his mouth to speak.

'Just, don't, ask!' she said.

After a pause, he thought better of it, and he looked down at Jai. She was peering up at him from the shelter of her sling with her big dark eyes, and she seemed to be smiling at the movements of the horse. Pulling his attention away from her, he pressed on around the lower slopes of the mountain, in the direction of where he thought he might find his family.

Having only covered a few miles, and without warning, two Maasai warriors in their teens stepped out in front of the travellers. They were traditionally dressed but were armed with automatic rifles. One took the reins of Siri's horse and demanded in English.

'Get down from the beast!'

Siri complied, and his pistol was taken from him.

Siri spoke calmly, in Maasai.

‘You condemn us to death without the horses, take one only.’

‘We will have the animals, but you can keep your woman, as you are Maasai.’

The second Maasai asked.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I am looking for my people. I am not sure where they are. Perhaps you know of, Lemayian, my son and chief.’

They both knew Lemayian, as he was chief of all the Maasai tribe in that region, as was his ancestors.

It was the Maasai holding Siri’s horse, whose name was Koinet, who was the first to understand the implications.

‘You are Miterienanka!’ he said with awe.

‘Yes,’ chuckled Siri, ‘but I am just an old man now.’

Siri was given his gun back with profuse apologies, and the two young men insisted that they could guide them to where Siri’s people would be.

It took a few minutes for Siri to explain to May Ling what was happening.

‘You did not tell me that your father was chief of the *whole* tribe.’

Siri replied with a smile.

‘You didn’t mention to me that your father was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China.’

‘Musab told you!’ said May Ling. ‘I have always felt that, when we have been together, my pedigree was the last thing on your mind.’

Having explained the situation to May Ling, they continued their journey in a westerly direction. Whilst the two Maasai warriors led the way on foot, Siri remained mounted, and continued to lead May Lings horse.

They had just joined a track-way, leading to the savannah below, when two shots were heard and one of the Maasai boys crumpled to the ground. The other warrior, Koinet, dropped down with his rifle aimed at the higher ground behind them, and May Ling called to Siri to move and get them away, but he just sat on his

stationary horse. Then she noticed that he was drooping, and she could see blood trickling down the horse's flank. Falling heavily from her mount, onto the stony track-way, she leaped up and caught Siri, just as he toppled from the saddle, and they fell together in a crumpled heap. He was sprawled across her, face-down, and May Ling could hear Jai beginning to get upset. With a huge effort, she managed to turn Siri over onto his back and checked that Jai was unhurt. Siri showed no signs of movement, and May Ling reached out and felt for a pulse in his neck, but there was none. She hastily cut through the tape that held Jai's sling to Siri's chest, and recovered her precious child.

There had been no more shots fired, but they were completely exposed, May Ling crawled to the sheltered side of Siri's body for cover. Once there, with Jai snuggled out of sight between May Ling and Siri's dead body, she began to weep.

After, what seemed like an hour or more of lying flat in the hot sun, with no sight or sound from their attackers, Koinet indicated that they should begin to crawl towards the horses that had wandered to a nearby patch of vegetation.

'Put the gun down!' came a command from behind them.

The attacker, for there was only one, was an ethnic European, and he had spent the last hour manoeuvring around them in order to silently approach from behind.

Koinet turned and began to bring his gun around, but a casual shot into the ground temporarily blinded him with grit and he dropped his weapon.

The man could see that Siri was dead. He looked over May Ling, and then gave her an admiring wink. May Ling recoiled in disgust as he turned his attention to Koinet, who was sitting and rubbing at his eyes.

'Well matey, unlike the little lady, I can't see much point in keeping *you*,' and he brought up his hunting rifle towards Koinet.

A shot rang out. The man fell forward onto one knee. He began to turn and bring his gun about as a second shot hit him in the side of his head. Blood and brains spayed over the crouching Koinet as the man fell sideways across the ground.

May Ling was standing with Jai in her left arm and Siri's gun, the gift from Hatch, in her right. It was levelled at the man and she slowly advanced, firing shot after shot into the dead man until the magazine was exhausted, but still she fired imaginary shots into the murderer of her beloved. Her arm began to shake, and she let the gun fall from her fingers

When Koinet had recovered his sight, he was almost as distraught as May Ling. He had lost his friend as well as an almost mythological Maasai hero, who had been killed whilst under his protection.

Together, they examined Siri and found no vital signs. They managed to scrape a hollow in the hard, baked ground beside the track-way, in which they reverently laid him. May Ling, her hair falling about his face, covered him with tears and kisses before drawing his red blanket over his body and, together, May Ling and Koinet carefully built a stone cairn over the beloved husband and chief.

The dead Maasai warrior was then laid alongside the cairn before Koinet turned his attentions toward the dead white man. Building himself up into a rage, he kicked and stamped on the body until he heard the sounds of breaking bones. May Ling stood silently, watching with Jai in her arms, her body moving in sympathy with each blow that was being delivered. She eventually had to look away as Koinet beheaded and emasculated the body with Siri's machete, hurling the head and genitals away into the rocky terrain. The remains, he dragged down the slope, away from the cairn, before he gave up with exhaustion and returned to May Ling.

They sat beside the cairn and ate and drank from their combined supplies whilst Jai, lying naked upon a sheet, was happily kicking and enjoying her freedom. When they felt sufficiently recovered, they each gave a silent goodbye to Siri and Koinet's companion, then collected up their belongings and made their way toward the two horses. They were still grazing, but a little further away due to the noise of May Ling's bout of target practice and, it wasn't until she had remounted, that she realised that she was going to have take the lead. Koinet had no riding skills whatsoever but,

after a couple of failed attempts to mount the animal, he abandoned the idea of riding and, with a rein in each hand, he walked ahead in their search for Lemayian.

Chapter XX

THE MAASAI MARA - 2060

The Maasai are on the move, singing in time with their step. There are little more than a dozen adults with a few children, and some emaciated looking cattle walking ahead of them. The young men, armed with assault rifles, are scouting ahead for any grazing for the cattle, and bush meat for the people, or any danger. May Ling is walking with Siri's family, and a three-year old naked girl, Jai, is holding her hand. Jai has her father's athletic body and, from her mother, she has long straight black hair and beautiful oriental eyes.

May Ling is almost unrecognisable. Her complexion has darkened from a light golden colour to nut brown, and her hair is beaded. She is wearing traditional Maasai dress and Musab's neck-chain which is hanging from her neck and glistens in the sun.

Desertification has forced them to migrate northward through South Sudan towards the Nile valley. The clan is skirting the last remains of a lake, and leaving deep footprints in the damp clay as they pass. The surface water has disappeared leaving only an expanse of stiffening mud, and the dry, wind blown, savannah dust is gradually covering any evidence of it having existed. They found some grazing along the disappearing shore, and water has been collected by digging wells into the dampest spots but it was time to move on again in search of the next lifesaving oasis.

Koinet is walking ahead with his young wife, given to him in reward for the return of Siri's daughter and her mother, and Jai wriggles out of her mother's grasp in an attempt to walk in his footprints. She occasionally succeeds in matching Koinet's stride, leaving little footprints in his, whilst May Ling is ever watchful for danger.

In a Russian intelligence gathering centre, rows of uniformed military personnel are engaged in monitoring information received from surveillance equipment. Two of them, an operative and a

senior officer are observing a wide angled view of the Maasai walking in front of May Ling.

‘Do we continue to monitor them Colonel?’ asks the operative.

‘No. No I do not think we will learn anything worthwhile. Leave it on line as long as it continues to function, but remove it from the active surveillance list. We know where she is if we need to find her but she has become an irrelevance.’

Jai is moaning and getting tired of walking and she runs in front of her brother, Lemayian. With her arms stretched out in a plea to be carried, he smiles and scoops up his little sister by her waist and she giggles with joy as he lifts her in the air so that she can see over the heads of the Maasai. As she is suspended in his outstretched arms, Jai points and laughs at a mushroom cloud, which can just be seen in the far distance to the North West. The Maasai are unnerved by the sight as they remember the night of the attack on Lake Victoria, and they stand in awe of the distant phenomena.

As there are no strategic targets in that direction, May Ling understands that the UN has very likely initiated, what they hope, will be a nuclear solution to global warming. She calms the Maasai by falsely reassured them that they are safe from the detonation, but she is fully aware of the dangers and hardships that may follow. It will need all of the Maasai’s experience and knowledge of the savannah, and May Lings scientific understanding, for the Maasai to survive and persist into the future.

POSTSCRIPT

Following completion, in early 2014 I have discovered several omissions of environmental issues but, most importantly, I had not sufficiently stressed the very real and dire threat from the potential release of huge quantities of methane from the thawing permafrost in the Arctic and the methane clathrates in the oceans. This process has already begun, and Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas.

Also, when I began writing in 2010, I placed the collapse of society sooner than I thought possible at the time, at around 2050, in order to imbue a sense of urgency; however, I now believe that I stumbled upon a creditable timescale. In the case of global cooling taking president, a period of 2019 to 2035 is believed by some to be a period in which northern latitude will become uninhabitable.

Civilisation, unsustainable in the long term and dominated by power addicted tyrants, was a poor exchange for the freedom of the open savannah or prairie, and by the time that industrialisation had arrived, humanity had already been given notice to mend its ways or quit. Also, as good stewardship of our world and the life upon it has continued to be abandoned in favour of personnel enrichment, it is possible that we may be among the last humans to exist. Therefore, rather than continue to spend our remaining days in pursuits dictated by the establishment, the time has surely come to be fully immersed into whatever we truly enjoy – whatever gives us fulfilment and satisfaction.

A comment has been made related to the growing environmental crisis, "Humanity foolishly behaves as if it is immortal." This is not entirely unjustified, as we hope for immortality through our children. However, with the loss of a habitat for our descendants, our immortality will have been truly lost.