

THE DARK ARTS
THE HIKAPHTAH TRILOGY



EDITIONS ESCALIERS
THE RAW EDITION
2007

To my beloved wife,
and a very close friend
suffering the indignation and oppressive forces of professional
mobbing, led by perverse manipulators.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's
imagination. Any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental

This paperback edition 2007

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The Author asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work

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THE DARK ARTS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

KYM STAEV
EDITIONS ESCALIERS

Under these circumstances, the only considerable escape is to quit, and run for your life while you still have what's left of your sanity. There is little chance of winning against such perverse characters. Even spending a fortune on legal fees in law courts, with a futile chance of winning, is not compensation for the stigma remaining. Our voice is the only tool revealing the existence of such 'terrorists' (a new cliché). And, as many of our protected political leaders fall into this perverse category, we must ask the serious question; who is protecting us, the people, from these tyrants?

It is easy to label our adversaries and minority groups as the evil element, who are left no other opportunity for actions other than to use covert hostilities labelled as 'acts of terrorism'. They are not guilty of crimes greater than the political leaders of the powerful nations they oppose. These political leaders are tyrants who wield their perverse political manipulations on the whole world. Governments using all sorts of corrupt mechanisms, manipulating the media and the people, to get what they want. We are left asking the question, '*who really are the terrorists of our world?*' When nations scream out about the innocent victims of 'terrorist' acts, we all fall into compassionate silence condemning these atrocities. When thousands innocent people get killed in a country that is attacked illegally, we, the same people, vote our same political tyrants back into power. We remain bigoted hypocrites – we deserve a little taste of what we ignorantly dish out. Democracy is dead and decaying, a bygone myth. Plutocracy has been haunting us for the last century. Tyranny is a reality where democratic freedom and liberty are just theatrical illusions.

Conscious of these fallacies, provoked me to enter a fictional world where I can take care of business in a coward's revenge

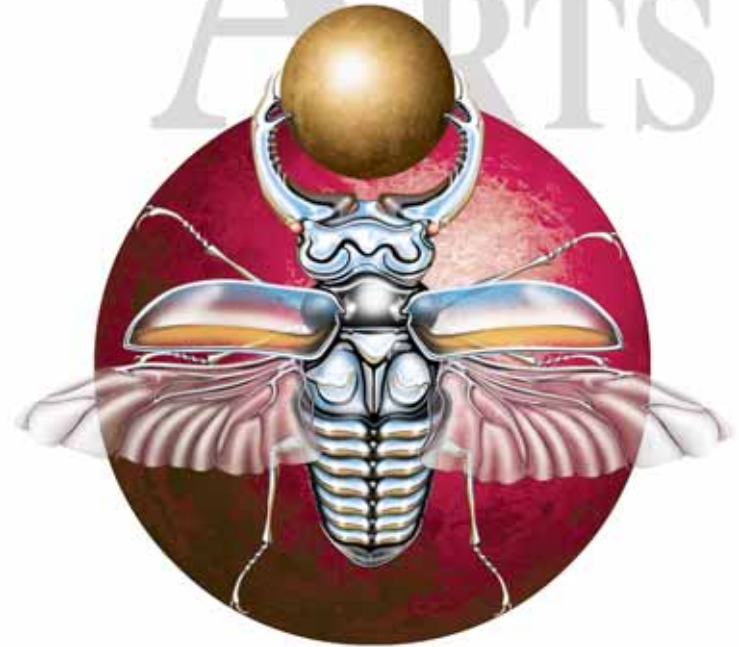
on events that have affected all of us. Unfortunately we are all responsible for the ugliness and violence in our lives. It is difficult to confront and contain, the evil that is hides inside us all. I sadly discovered, during my early years of education (remnants of British Imperialism), that oppressive folks taint the institution's reputation. Nasty individuals, given the responsibility to guide young enthusiasts, could let their devil out to play. Games and rituals of persecution and humiliation, including corporal punishment, were common disciplines in controlling the student ranks. These same disorders flourished in the home, being handed down like a genetic illness. From being the 'prey' to growing into an adult, we carried our baggage of resent, and we all eagerly anticipated the time when revenge can show it's ugly face to become the 'oppressor'. This is a continuing vicious circle.

Having children is the sensitive time where our personalities are no longer bound to the 'individual' or the 'couple' environment, but exposed to a small community. Vulnerability and insecurity surfacing like old oil spills, are our anchor chains linked together by our education. To resist falling into these indoctrinated clichés is hard work and often just impossible. To be tolerant is a virtue, but to be open to change and express flexibility in questioning our doctrines is perhaps the intelligent beginning of change. To trash one very worn out 'hand me down' pair of jeans would be refreshing. It is our responsibility not to create the 'perverse manipulator' in our children. Exposing these deviates to our children, showing them what these monsters look like in real life, is part of the solution. Do not attempt to protect our children from the ugliness of our reality as one day their innocence is betrayed in any case. Who better to educate and expose these injustices to them than us – the parents? This is indeed our responsibility.

*I know what wisdom and knowledge really are.
 I was determined to learn the difference between knowledge,
 and foolishness, wisdom and madness.
 But I found out that I might as well be chasing the wind.
 The wiser you are, the more worries you have;
 the more you know the more it hurts.*

Ecclesiastes 1 verses 16-18

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VOLUME I THE BOOK OF SEKHMET

A verse appears at the beginning of each Chapter. These *Spells* are translated quotes from the ancient Egyptian book of *Magic Formulas for Going forth by Day*, commonly known as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

Sekhmet is the Lion-headed Goddess of war. Sister and wife of Ptah, she's associated with the destructive forces of the sun's heat.

This Volume is dedicated to the destructive force of Re - the paradox to his existence.



CHAPTER 1

THE DISCOVERY – 1999

Spell 70

My place of slaughter belongs to Him who is over the place of sacrifice; I am happy and pleased with the altar of my father Osiris. I rule in Busiris, I travel about on its riverbanks, I breathe the east wind because of its tresses, I grasp the north wind by its braided lock, I grip the south wind by its plaits, and I grasp the west wind by its nape. I travel around the sky on its four sides; I give breath to the blessed ones among those who eat bread.



The sheet of corrugated iron flaps in the lashing gusts. Tapping against a diesel drum, this irritating Techno beat is disquieting, lost in this apparently deserted encampment. The unnerving sound, together with a generator's whine, is the only animation on this whipped arid landscape. The scorching sun is a blurred spot suspended in a daunting ochre haze.

The geological outfit is happy to be inside, protected from this shit storm. The confines of these long 'mobile-homes' provide the perfect shelter. Pondering over surveyors' charts swilling on ice-cold Stella beer,

the three key members keep themselves occupied waiting for this September sand storm to quit. They use the bad weather to plan ahead. Busy chatting over the hum of the labouring air-conditioner, strong gusts of scraping grit bite into the aluminium hull. It rudely butts into their casual conversation.

Some of these winds are so strong they carry Sahara dust over the Alps dumping it in countries like Switzerland – the land of banks, where they are more accustomed to the depositing of dirty laundered cash rather than dirty sand. But out here, nothing like this matters.

The local serpents habitually hide from the storms. Ignoring the intrusion of a huge ambulatory settlement, the slithering creatures take advantage of this implantation, adopting them as new sanctuaries. This arid landscape has changed, and will change again. The snakes adapt remarkably well to the transformation.

Unbeknown to the new settlers, the snake population is unusually high in this area. Aware of this strange phenomenon, as well as the risk and consequences, the local shepherds keep their sheep and goats well away. Grazing the flocks and herds up on the high plateau, they can look down over these snake invested low lands. This works for them. Fortunately snakes tend to be very territorial, thus staying out of the way of these ungodly reptiles is possible. And the good book says: *Then the Lord God said to the snake, "You will be punished for*

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this; you alone of all animals must bear this curse: From now on you will crawl on your belly, and you will have to eat dust as long as you live. I will make you and the woman hate each other; her offspring and yours will always be enemies. Her offspring will crush your head, and you will bite their heel."

Hal places his Bible down carefully. Pushing away from his workstation, tufting on his unlit pipe, he resumes his laid back posture. "Genesis", Hal mumbles, still preferring the Phil Collin's version. He draws back the curtain in despair. The whipping sand frantically grazes the glass window confirming the critical situation.

This geological team is prospecting for crude oil deposits around the globe. It's a well-paid full-time job. For the moment their top-paying client is the US, but being contracted by China, Australia, Thailand, Russia and the Middle East, is keeping them very busy. Gold mining is old school comparing it to the petroleum one. As the gold reserves don't carry any weight in global economy, wealth relies on natural resources, and the capacity to produce energy. Fossil fuel is a strong league player, thus, prospecting for oil is still an extremely lucrative business.

The two helicopters stand stuck to the ground like giant blind insects, frightened to spread their folded wings and takeoff into the red-blown sky. Covered with tarpaulins, and the reactors capped at both ends, protects the turbine rotors from the abrasive sandblasts. The vulnerable insects also remain grounded.

The Discovery

The crew is very concerned about their air conditioners. Heeding the storm's warning they create 'make-shift' protection around the cooling units. The safeguard is considered adequate, fixing plastic sheets on aluminium ladders. These inverted-chimney structures, allowing the air to flow freely, should keep the damaging dust out. The team is desperately hoping that this improvised Venturi effect will exclude the sand. Sand that could easily clog up these blessed units.

The diesel generator keeps on banging out the electricity. The noisy motor is protected inside a crude, rusty, shipping container. A cut out hole in the metal roof spews forth the black stinking fumes. The smoke's trail is quickly lost in the confusion of the persistent torrents. The motor's raucous roar, amplified to an unbearable noise, trapped inside this hollow metal shell, can hardly be heard. The ferocious wind decapitates this racket with eerie efficiency.

Close to the mobile quarters, all three Land Cruisers are parked with dark tinted windows closed tight. The grills are masked with temporary customised black vinyl covers. The dark veils, with peeking headlamps, are reminiscent of the local women folk. Veils make sense living out in this arid land with whipping sand storms. Following a strict long-standing religious tradition, it all suddenly makes sense in the midst of all this dust. It is better to cover up, shut-up, rather than eat dirt. But with crude oil promises, all of these deterrents are acceptable

collateral damage. The petroleum industry is a serious business. The money pump continuously supports this enterprise. The US is getting anxious about securing its future with its never-ending desperate need for fossil fuel energy guaranteeing a number one position as the most powerful nation in the world. Take away this barrelled energy is like unplugging a light bulb in the next door neighbour's junk-filled cellar, suddenly plunged into pitch dark – nothing works any more. Terror-stricken, beads of sweat are impregnated with calamity, chaos and confusion. The US can't afford to be unplugged. The bedlam would destroy the country.

Safe inside, away from the gritty grips of this storm, Gad sweeps up a copy of the *New York Times*, already four days old. He scans over the usual 'horse-shit' propaganda issues. Turning the page, a small article catches his attention. It's from a spunky journalist pointing out that Clinton is doing his job, but the American press seems to be more preoccupied invading his private life than worrying about important issues like worldwide pollution. The USA's automotive industry is one of the major polluting contributors that have strong economic leverage on the government. He remarks that Clinton is trying hard to juggle the paradox, but not without mountains of pressure from the industrialists, who are no doubt the ones behind anything labelled 'un-hinge the president'. The leaders of the automobile industries want their big fat wheels to continue to roll on the Greenback freeway. Anything that gets in the way of the

industrialists' prosperous future is considered a thorn worth removing permanently. The future is looking sketchy, and the prospects of a second George to run the show will be nothing short of catastrophic for the world. Gad's frown expresses his conundrum, with personal convictions contradicting professional ones.

In reading another article, Gad is worried that Gore has been nominated to be the man to replace Clinton for the new elections to be held this coming year. Clinton and a Bush (which by definition is nothing short of a dumb shrub) are both out busy campaigning. Gad is concerned about his home state of Texas. He is aware that Bush, another all out 'New Born Christian' Texan, could join the corrupt ranks of LBJ (L.B.J should have met Monica Lewinski, doing justice to his initials).

Everything out there is done with the Lord's blessings, including a *coup d'état*. For Texans, 'oil' is their middle name and 'guns' are part of their cultural costume, tending to make it easy to forecast where the world will finish up. Worse is, if the new US president teams up with tyrants, that go way back to Tricky Dicky's and Ronald Raygun's eras, things could really go sour.

Fed up, Gad throws the paper missing the garbage can. The banging iron is tapping on his nerves. But Gad's real anger is media provoked.

"Damn, dudes, can y'all go out and kick the crap out of that metal sheet?"

Hal and Tom shoot quick blank looks at Gad, then immediately ignore him.

This campsite is bordering the Middle East, which is still full of political tensions. Frequent outbursts of violence tell the pathetic story. *Desert Storm*, still fresh on everybody's mind, should have been named the *Crude Slick*. Bush Senior couldn't quite finish the job of occupying Iraq, which helps keep the pace of turmoil up. An episode in our history, where we conjure up the idea that either the French, Russian or Chinese secret services gave Saddam the idea to claim back Kuwait as a state of Iraq (probably the CIA). A concept that keeps us forever held in the invisible grip of international corruption, where 'oil' is the bottom line in this abyss from Hell. Never under-estimate the manipulative force of the selfish, with their greed dominating bigoted plots.

"Hal, you were in Iraq in the seventies?" Gad enquires, with the Middle East still needling his thoughts.

"I was a young man starting my career," Hal replies, while slipping his pipe into his pocket.

"How do y'all picture this shit going down, dude?"

"Well, since I lost my job with BP, when Saddam Hussein and his government decided to nationalise the Iraq Petroleum Company, it became a serious issue for my redundant countrymen and the US. The British never got over being shafted as far back as 58, when they were kicked out of Iraq. Worse, in 1972, when BP forced Kirkuk to cut Iraq's production by fifty percent, to hold world supply steady. It illustrated to the Iraqis that their rich

resources were being controlled and manipulated by IPC. You see, IPC was originally composed of five companies: BP, Shell, Esso, Mobil and the French Petroleum Company. When Iraq helped instigate OPEC, whose objective was to shift the power in favour of the producers of fuel, it complicated the situation."

"Saddam quickly understood the importance of Iraq's oil reserves," Gad adds.

"Too right he did. Iraqis were tired and very bitter about foreign domination from day 'dot' with the Samaritans, the Akkadians, with Sargon who inspired Saddam, then the Hittites and the Assyrian rule. Followed by the Persians who coined the name Iraq. Then Alexander the Great's Greek soldiers arriving for the famous *Wedding of Ten Thousand*, symbolising the meeting of East with West."

"That's a bloody hoot!" Tom interjects, now caught in Hal's synopsis of Iraq's history.

"Now the Islamic religion surfaces, then the brutality of Genghis Khan. The Safavids replace the Mongols. The Ottoman Empire was replaced by British occupation to secure their postal services from India. The French had a go, followed by the Russians in the *Great Game*, and then came the Germans, then back to the British. Christ is it any wonder these locals are pissed off! But here comes the real brick. In 1907 the Brits discovered a huge deposit of oil in Iran leading my country to believe that Iraq may be rich in oil. Today, it looks like being the world's largest deposit. Do I need to go any further with this sordid tale? But Saddam did

change the state of Iraq's economy. In 1973 its oil yielded one billion Dollars. By 1980, it had reached twenty-six billion dollars. And his killing of any threatening element was a process that had been used by all of his predecessors including the Imperialistic British, not something I'm proud of. Iraq's waging war with Iran took its toll economically. America would help Iraq against Iran and this was the start of shit hitting the fan. The mad Americans had, and still have one primary concern; how to secure the flow of oil into their country."

"So!" Gad says, provoking Hal to finish.

"And so, my dear boy, the future is not bright. No one likes a nasty dictator, and our media, indoctrinated by American political tyrants, will do a job manipulating the rest of the world to remove this Iraqi obstacle. One man, who has the potential of having the rest of the world queuing up at the pump, is too dangerous. This fear alone will provoke a march-in to take control. No doubt my country will be on the front line, still carrying the scars of '58', then being squeezed out with Saddam's move to nationalise the IPC. Oil that we believe is ours."

"Not good mate! Not good at all, and here we are running around the bloody world looking for oil deposits," Tom says sipping his beer.

"Do y'all feel guilty knowing what we do?"

Tom and Hal reply in unison, "No!"

"But we know why the US is a target for bloody acts of terrorism," Tom adds.

The storm affects the lads pushing them into turmoil on political discussions. They share gutsy criticism about

short squalls of desperate covert attacks against the corrupt US establishment doing little to undermine the covert ambitions of the starred and striped bigots. The American leaders manipulate fake concern labelling these pathetic attacks as 'acts of terrorism,' needing these desperate attacks to fuel their own organised conspiracies. They'll effectively use any senseless acts of violence as a means to justify declarations of war. Battles that will convince the world that America defends the world against the evil of terrorism. Conflicts that they, themselves, have provoked. And ironically these deceitful atrocities are perceived as appropriate measures of defending the myth of freedom. America's economy will collapse if it can't secure resources for energy. This motivates any government, Republican or Democrat.

"Mate the big picture is fuckin' ugly – full of bloody conspiracies and lies. I don't even wanna start goin' down that track, pal." Tom says disgusted.

In this last year of the twentieth century (1999) the US continues to meddle in foreign affairs that are perceived by the Islamic communities of the Middle East as continual manipulation, harassment and oppression. A nation whose sole interest is securing the black gold that lies beneath these peoples' feet. And the prospecting continues with hopes of new strikes, even in neighbouring countries like Egypt. Like all Third World countries fossil fuel deposits can guarantee a prosperous future. Oil is a powerful resource, and one hell of an economic lever. Egypt is prospecting for oil at the expense of an all

American energy company. Enron foot the bill with funds they don't have, via one of their seedy offshore companies, with the underlying agreement that the US has the unique purchase contract for the crude. If this freelance team strikes out, it will be a lost cause. If they strike big, the US secures another hold in the supply of oil. But digging holes for crude may not be the only thing you bring out of the earth, which will change life forever.

One hundred and forty kilometres by rail from Port Said via *Al Quantarah*, the mobile unit's base is set up a couple kilometres from the small village *Rummanah Biral-Abd*, which is a short distance from the Mediterranean Sea. AJEX, a geologic exploration company, sounding like a sister to the famous washing powder, used the rail link to transport their mobile container homes and offices. The two Wasp Jet helicopters flew everyone here the day before yesterday from Cairo.

Fortunately they were all nicely settled in before this storm set in. It's nothing new or exceptional, it is just a matter of waiting for it to blow over.

Tom turned off the radio transmitter. The static was driving them all nuts. Anyway, they could all survive a few hours in the peace of the radio's silence, but the banging tin is still an issue. The transmitter had been problematic since they set it up. The storm is certainly not helping matters. This morning will be spent indoors, away from the dust and stinging sand.

"Hey Tom, I want you to check out the electro-plates when this damn storm breaks, dude." Gad says, changing the subject.

"No worries, mate," Tom replies, leaning back on his chair imagining he's blowing out smoke. He misses the stinky habit. The dark-brown, cold Stella beer bottle is still in his steady hand collecting condensation. Tom is obviously Australian and does nothing to camouflage his origin. His slate blue Bond singlet, stained with breakfast egg yoke, and his khaki coloured shorts, equipped with enough pockets to ransack a supermarket, tells his story. His bare feet hug the edge of the metal desk. His long socks and R. J. Williams boots are airing out at the foot of his chair. Tom's crew-cut, dark tan and Italian features give him a Stallone-sheep-shearer look. His prescription specs is the only item out of place – far too sophisticated for a middle-aged, Aussie bushman.

For a man in his forties, Tom is doing it well. He uses his experience, intuition and seductive charisma to make everyone feel comfortable with their climatology and integration anxieties. His vast global experiences allow him to quickly adapt to new ethnic groups. Tom, like a chameleon, adopts behavioural strategies that blend him into these foreign cultures. Looking much younger than he really is, he wears a bushy moustache and a tiny goatee under his bottom lip to age himself a little. Continually worried about his growing weight, since he quit smoking, he has become a fussy eater.

He silently mocks Hal's obsession with Christian religious instruction and history lessons. Tom has put all religions to bed a long time back, considering that 'man' never got it all quite right. If tempted, he would've considered the teachings of Buddha to be idealistically closest to true enlightenment. Tom's high IQ is a handicap, placing him on the outside looking in, where he's convinced all religions are nothing more than a means to control, manipulate and indoctrinate all those needing to believe in something. It's about compensating primal fears and insecurities (including that life is in vain), feeling abandoned in a silent field of existentialism. He's waiting for Hal to start the religious debate, but fortunately Gad doesn't give him the chance.

"And Hal, I want you to check the Magnetometer, dude."

Hal looks up, cut from his preoccupying thoughts on Iraq, wondering if he should raise Muslim faith issues.

Peeking over his half glasses he replies, "Goodness me Gad, I've been over that thing a hundred times, she's in pristine condition. It will not miss a beat." Gad threw a familiar 'yeah, heard this one' look.

"Okay, OK, good Gad, you win, I'll look at it my dear man." Hal replies, loving to lean on the pun of 'good God'. Hal dislikes unnecessary prattle, but loves to state his political points of view. Running a hand through his greying hair, he considers slapping a debate on, but then wipes it off on his Levis jeans, deciding to leave it for another day. His jeans are part of him in any climatic condition, but his typically English under-

wear changes with the seasonal temperatures, from long Johns in the cold, to light boxer shorts for the hot climates. He prefers shirts with breast pockets to pack away a small pocket book and pen to jot notes. Plus, he can tuck his glasses away when removing them from the comfort of the bridge of his thin nose. He loves his sleeveless jacket, also covered in pockets. These small compartments provide space for his portable tool kit.

The trailer door bursts open. Pumping hearts bump and jump. At first they think it's the wind playing cranky tricks. Before any of the surprised men move to close the door, Sharon comes clambering through it.

"Gee-zz, I hate this shit," she spurts, while removing her goggles. Trying to unravel the turban like scarf, wound around her face for protection, she blocks the small entrance leaving Todd stuck out behind her. She could've been mistaken for a local if it hadn't been for the overalls and light flight jacket. Her southern European features glow in these climatic conditions. She looks Spanish with the 'born in America' accent labelling her for good. Extremely pretty, her smile just adds more beauty, lighting up her face. She keeps her long brown hair tied up. Her clothes hide this shapely woman, giving a 'Tom-boy' impression. Surrounded by horny men, she tries desperately to play down her feminine features.

Todd is pushing from behind in a desperate attempt to close the door caught in the dusty gusts.

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The confined space left by Sharon is making Todd's task impossible. Now she purposely blocks.

"Jen, can you move your butt?"

"Piss-off Brownny."

"Do you want me to move it for you hon," Todd says with gestures of grabbing her firm buttocks.

"Close the damn door, dudes," Gad shouts.

"Oh my God, you wish!" Sharon mumbles moving to the disappointment of Todd. He has great fantasies about getting into Sharon's pants. Unfortunately Gad has beaten him to it. Todd nicknames her 'Jen,' a tribute to her 'Jennifer Lopez' look.

Todd is the youngest and skinniest in the crew. His extraverted behaviour expresses his lack of confidence and inexperience. Todd's sharp wit and light sarcasm appeals to Hal and Tom's humour. Both these men grew up with antics of humiliation and persecution. Gad didn't have much time for stag games – waste of vital energy. Todd is the jester, wearing out the others with silly antics like the sleeves in his GAP sweaters. Unlike his useless comedy, he turns the worn out garments into practical sleeveless articles. His tee-shirt sleeves are left poking through these circumcised garments. Everything hangs out over his faded worn jeans. His tightly laced Caterpillars appear to hold the whole 'look' together.

This young enthusiast keeps the team's spirits up, even under the strain of very difficult explorations.

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He is running through 'prime-time', where sex preoccupies his idle mind. Every new skirt arriving, Todd's out to greet them with lustful enthusiasm. These occasions are quite scarce in this job. He is considering changing his career – to work somewhere where the girls are hot and plentiful. However, he'd miss the excitement of AJEX's adventures. Gad tells him that he's a victim of the 'grass is greener' syndrome. He can talk he's the one pumping on Sharon's well.

"Knock it off y'all," Gad snaps.

"It's okay snooks, we only came over to tell you that Karrim has cooked up a feast, and well, Todd followed, on the off chance that I may let him get down and boogie on my booty. Didn't you Todd?"

"Oh Jen, how you wish, man!"

"Oh, aren't we smart Mister Brown!"

"Actually I have to work for my living hon, here what I'm sayin'," Todd replies joining Hal.

"We won't be long Gad, old man, I just want to show Todd and Sharon the flight plans for tomorrow afternoon. We'll join you over at the canteen shortly." Tom finishes his beer and pops the bottle into the plastic crate of empties. Grabbing his goggles, he's ready to leave. Suddenly, the room jars as if bumped by a careless driver reversing into a tight parking space. The container moans.

"Wha-za?" Todd asks, grabbing the desk just in case things get serious.

"It felt like one support moved, dude," Gad replies, not too fussed. "I'll check it out later."

Hal just shrugs, insisting that they should

concentrate on his navigation proposal. These are plans for a flight that never takes place, but they don't know this yet.

"Okay dudes and gals, lets go to the Diner before Karrim starts tuggin' on my rope."

"Gal - singular, drop the 's' smarty pants, if you please Mister Larry Masterson," Sharon whispers with a broad smile, dropping the 'Gad' sobriquet.

"Oh, I thought I heard you refer to Todd as a bit of a pussy," Gad replies, loud enough for Todd to hear.

"Hoorah for boobies! See y'all later, dudes," Todd says in his best Texan drawl, paying Gad out.

"Great, more fart fodder." Tom says with a wide grin, thinking about Karrim's menu.

"Got that right, dude." Gad replies.

Larry, known to everyone as Gad, is Texan and he detests the label. His distant French and Italian descendants mark his broad features. His family have been in the oil business for generations. When Gad studied Geology, at the Baylor University in Houston, he didn't imagine that fieldwork was going to be this tough. Aware that university often neglects to prepare students for the 'real world' he took the plunge well. At uni, his colleagues gave him the sobriquet of the GAD (Geology And Dames), the only things that really mattered to Larry during his education. His campus days appear far, far away, but 'The GAD' stuck like gum under his school desk. He's often buried into articles and books about his profession - the only university habit

remaining. His wavy crop of chestnut hair contrasts his square jaw and broad straight mouth and his sharp piercing eyes. He doesn't miss much.

"Hey Gad do you want me to do a 'wakey, wakey, hands off snakey on Chris, mate?" Tom asks, while stepping out of the trailer ready to fight the wind. Gad pauses. "No, it's his day off, dude. We'll leave him to his own devices. He worked damn hard flying all our kit in here getting us settled. I think he'll be happy to have his time out in peace, Tom." Gad bends down on one knee checking the supporting blocks keeping the container up off of the ground. The eddies of dust make things difficult. Holding his scarf up to his mouth, peering through goggles, he sees one concrete support has slipped on man-made cut stone, unearthed by the harsh eroding gusts.

The wind suddenly drops, just as it had suddenly sprung up out of nowhere. Running out of fuel the diesel generator cuts out. The sudden silence is spooky. The coincidence of the motor stalling, like the wind, gives the illusion that the engine generated the insane storm. The Sun is recuperating, taking on a form that is unfortunately too familiar. This scorching heat is unbearable even in the poorest season. It's mid autumn, but the days remain very hot.

Heading towards food, Gad is relieved at the prospect of being able to work again. He turns over the phrase, 'the quicker we get this done dudes, the quicker we can get out of here.'

The job pushes them into some of the world's most extreme climates. From northern Alaska, freezing your balls off, to the sticky humidity of the tropics, bathing in your own sweat, to the blazing sun of the Sahara choking on dust. Even though Gad is riding prime time, his early forties, these harsh conditions are taking their toll. But as the saying goes, 'a change is as good as a holiday'. Except, in this case, there aren't many 'holiday-makers' out and about in these remote places.

Oil is already being pumped from the most southern tip of this Sina region down near At-Tur. Now prospecting is moving north into the Sahara-at-Tih. Surveys have indicated the possibility of strikes up north. From aerial gravimeter readings, a low-density salt dome has been identified. It indicates the possibility of natural gas and petroleum deposits. Prospecting is now going into its second stage. This team is preparing to use a number of more sophisticated techniques to confirm or cancel out these initial findings. For what is about to unfold, right beneath their feet, no one planned or expected it.

Karrim, the cook, a handsome local decked out in the typical local lightweight *galabia*, is happy. Most of the team are on time for lunch. He's prepared a typical Egyptian meal, *molokheyya* (vegetable soup) to be followed by *kofta* (a type of kebab) with *foul* (long beans in a tomato sauce). He keeps a constant supply of *baba gannoug* (puree of grilled eggplant seasoned with garlic and lemon juice) to spread over Egyptian pitta bread.

Flat cakes baked in a small gas run stone-oven, which he prepares between meals.

This time the team doesn't hang around the table. They have done this often recently. Gad is happy because he can get things up and running. Sharon's buzzing because she can take to the air with her chopper. Up and around, reminding her of short reconnaissance flights during service days in *Desert Storm*. There are two things she loves – flying and screwing Gad.

Sand has piled up around the supports keeping these home trailers up off the ground. The plastic tarps wrapped around the light metal ladders have been dragged down with the weight of the built up sand. With the generator banging out the juice again, the air-conditioning units are back humming a happy tune, showing little signs of 'worse for wear'. Obviously the improvised protection worked.

Things begin to move with the dawning of a bright afternoon. Tom has teamed up with Assad and Hatem. These locals never appear to be bothered by the harsh climate, which draw on Tom's limited stamina. In one hour he will have to seek shade and rest.

Tom is extremely talented in many fields and exceeds in skilful drawing, a gift, as he puts it. A hobby that the whole crew enjoy, especially when he pins up caricatures and cartoons of their inane carrying on.

He loves joking with Todd about Assad's and Hatem's local dress, referring to them as his 'little drag queens'. Often Todd can't tell them apart, as most Nubians all look the same to him. Tom is extremely at ease with their obsession to pray to *Allah* at odd intervals during the day. Tom doesn't mock them about their religion. However, he is disappointed that clever Hal hasn't worked it all out by now. Hal doesn't recognise that these uneducated workers need the convictions of a religious doctrine to give their insignificant lives a little meaning and security.

Assad has slid out the bronze sheet panels. Hatem is plugging in the connecting electrical impulse cables. Tom has put on his computer harness and is booting up. He thinks to himself, 'I don't know why I'm bothering - this stuff is fine.' He notices a number of slithering traces cut into the fresh carpet of sand. The prints make him feel uncomfortable. He shivers flashing back to his childhood along the Murray River in Australia. He'd had his fair share of stumbling over snakes. The king brown and tiger snakes were a common event, unfortunately. Here, he just sees where they have been, and as far as he's concerned, 'let's keep it this way'.

"Ready fellas?" Tom calls waving for Assad to start dragging the connected polished panels over the ground. The panels slide like snow sledges over fresh powder, due to all the recent fallout. 'Go my little drag queens,' Tom thinks to himself smiling at the pun.

He concentrates on the progress of the panels. He's not interested in the readings on his portable laptop. The computer is registering the resistance of the underground layers. The five metal bronze plates are injecting electrical charges into the ground. These impulses are important to map the underground world. This technology can detect underground walls, old foundations and empty cavities.

Suddenly, Tom catches the readings lit on his liquid crystal screen. The graph being plotted is extremely unusual. Tom feels his anus muscle contract, and the hairs on his arms rise to the occasion. Confused by the presence of these very unexpected strange readings, he is suddenly very interested to continue.

"Don't stop Assad - keep going," Tom shouts.

Assad stops, calling back "What?"

"Keep going - fuckwit - shit! Keep moving, lad," Tom replies, waving frantically. Assad immediately understood.

"Dim dot!" Tom murmurs under his breath. His Zen slips on the slap of his frustration. Tom's eyes are glued to his LCD not really believing what he's seeing. Fortunately, while testing, he's recording. For once, he has no regrets storing this weird data. 'Wow, wait till I print this out - this reading is going to dunk the finger-bicky, mate. Gad's going to shit nails,' he thinks to himself.

"Jees-us, dude," Gad exclaims, running his fingers down the printout. He picks up the radio

microphone only to be met with a wall of nasty static. Twisting the tuner and frequency knobs, he attempts to correct it. His efforts are in vain. Throwing the mic onto the table he knows it will be quicker to find Hal and Sharon by scouting. Throwing on his reflective shades and Baseball cap he storms out to find them.

Sharon is getting her chopper ready. Her overall sleeves are tied around her waist leaving her firm breasts free to swim around in her olive green singlet. Her brown tanned shoulders are glistening in the sun and beads of sweat are already running down her forehead and cleavage. Her hands are covered in grease. She is too hot, but still happy preparing to fly. Sharon is smiling at her man who is walking briskly towards her.

“Hey y'all, where's Hal?”

“Well yeah, hi to you too,” she replies losing the grin.

“Sorry no time for bull-shit Sharon, you get ready as quickly as possible, and by the way this is not a routine check. It's you, me and Hal doin' big-time check-in' out this very goddamned ground we stand upon.”

“You got to be shitting me, right?”

“No, I'm not shitting you – move your fanny, gal.”

“Well aren't you going to tell me what's up?”

“Not sure darlin', but Tom's pulled some weird charts. Now we need to be up their doing our stuff. Y'all hear what I'm sayin'.”

“Okay, but you can go and haul Hal's arse out of his lab. You know Hal, you have to hit the panic button or we'll be waiting, you know what I'm sayin'.”

“How long till y'all be ready?” Gad asks putting on his serious theatrical face.

Sharon opens her dirty hands, shrugs and sensually replies, “ready when you are darlin'!” She watches Gad melt while swaying her hips throwing out her full chest. Her small erect nipples strain against the tank top's fabric. Gad puts his libido on hold.

The electric motor whines kicking in the reactor and the rotor blades start to cut into the air. Hal and Gad have strapped the magnetometer to the metal release harness, connecting it to the undercarriage of the helicopter's fuselage. Sharon is wincing from the radio static, but she's hoping that once they're air-born it will cut her some slack. Killing the radio she cutthroat signals to Hal and Gad. The loud drone of the chopper drowns any remnant of normal conversation. Facial expressions and hand gestures tell the stories between this tight crew.

Todd peaks out his office window to see another dust storm in the making. ‘Whaza! Man, we loose one and win another,’ he thinks disgruntled. He watches the helicopter rise. Dust eddies engulf the arena masking out the takeoff pad. The cloud starts to settle. “Yeah, that's what I'm sayin'!” Todd speaks with intent.

Gad twists his little flexible stick microphone away from his mouth. He mimes over the roar of the chopper, 'OK?' Hal replies with the thumbs up sign.

“Can you hear me boys? Over.” Sharon says

smiling. Usually their conversation is somewhat informal.

“Loud and clear. Over,” Hal replies sharing Sharon’s grin, reflected in the large rear-view mirror. Unlike a car, this mirror keeps a close eye on the passengers – not the outside traffic.

“You can let the dog out, Hal, I’m sweet.”

“Yeah! Damn right, babe,” Gad cut in, still readjusting his microphone. The static has dramatically eased off. Now the intermittent interference is bearable. Hal pulls the small lever releasing the missile-looking magnetometer from under the chopper. He engages a small motor that’s reeling out a very strong nylon cable securing the sensitive equipment. The device is far away from the helicopter. There will be no interference from this metallic whirly bird. Todd is locked into the satellite dish and is busy processing. Unlike the radio, it appears not to be effected by the electronic parasites.

“Todd, are you linked and ready? Over.”

“Man, this static is unbelievable. Over.”

“Are you linked up? Over.” Hal insists.

“Linked up and ready to run, man. You can get down and boogie, Hal. Over.”

“Sharon, you can start your sweep,” Hal says, while hitting the enter-key on his computer pad.

“All green up here y’all. Over.” Gad says excitedly.

“Information rea... ov...” Todd’s voice breaks up in the midst of crackling blur.

“Jees-us, this static is a dog-gone nuisance, dude.”

“Not to worry Gad, the link is up and running. We are recording, old boy!”

The chopper came in for a gentle landing with the Magnetometer fixed snugly back into its metal restraint harness once again. The cable well and truly home, wound back onto its mechanical reel. Assad and Hatem have turned their backs, covering their faces, while the chopper’s blades wind down the stinging dust.

The trio-crew members are busy backslapping with ‘high fives’ on a job well done. Wearing broad grins, Todd and Tom peek out of the dirty glass window. Their approaching team-mates are eager to share the results of this exercise inside the comfort of the tech unit. Again, packed into a small space, they all study the readings and test printouts. The data provokes exclamations of disbelief. Tom, however, is full of optimism.

“Mate, this is bloody fantastic!”

“Really gentlemen, I can’t believe it!” Hal’s pessimism surfaces like a choked turd in a natural spring.

“What-za! One to add to the old *WOW* book, man!” Todd can only joke, not being able to perceive the seriousness of the situation. Sharon expresses her natural curiosity with, “What’s up?” While Gad thumps the table with a simple exclamation of, “God damn it!”

Gad is the only one of the small gathering clearly aware of the serious consequences of their discovery. His mind slips to the concrete support on tilt with the strange stone step. They may be stuck out here for months, if this turns out to be a major archaeological discovery. “Do we just move on, y’all, makin’ out this doesn’t exist?”

The Hikaptah Trilogy

Everyone ignores Gad knowing his rhetorical question is wishful thinking. It's too late to plead ignorance.

Surprisingly, Todd is the first person to offer an explanation. His experiences in Alexandria speak for themselves. Being part of a team, using electrode-plate-resistance, to locate old foundations and underground water reservoirs in the ancient city of Alexandria, he has valuable input to offer. "It may be just a giant underground water tank!"

"I'm sorry old chap – really – out here!"

"I dunno Hal, Todd's just throwing in an idea, mate. I suppose you've got a better one!" Tom adds sarcastically.

"I may have had, if we'd been on the shores of the Nile near Luxor." Hal is still shaking his head.

"Wha-za-we do, man," Todd asks, turning to Gad. Tilting his baseball-cap, Gad scratches his sweaty forehead, replies despondently, "We have to contact the man himself, dude. Hal, can you please e-mail Andrew and draw him up a pretty picture of what we have goin'. Throw in a few PDF files of the charts." Gad throws Sharon a worrying look. She's gone very quiet. She knows intuitively something is out of whack.

Ironically it's a team of oil prospecting geologists who discover a lost Egyptian sanctuary, dedicated to the evil of the 'Earth's blood' – black crude oil.



Two Egyptian Military helicopters land. The third and forth can be seen as small hovering black insects just above the horizon. The military have arrived to secure the area. They will control who comes, who leaves and with what. This is a normal event to any foreign tourist busy visiting the wonders of ancient Egypt.

There are two groups. The Egyptian police are dressed in that all-familiar black uniform with small dabs of red to add a splash of colour to this somewhat oppressive garb. The black beret sits tilted to one side. Repressive automatic weapons hang from shoulders. The contrast of these dark uniforms against the golden sand makes them as easy to spot as dung beetles tiptoeing across the desert.

Another group form the more familiar military contingent. The camouflage colours shout 'army'. These guys have more grit in their teeth and appear to be ready for whatever. The military reflects a more serious game than the boys in black. The police tend to be gawking around wondering what they are supposed to be doing, out here, in the middle of no-mans land.

Professor Mahmoud Abdel-Khaled and Doctor Jacques Pittaloup have been busy working this site for the last month. Excavations have started and advanced, but the discovery's real significance is enigmatic. So far from the Nile, it's existence is inexplicable. It's rare to see these two reputable men, standing perplexed, side-by-side.

Doctor Pittaloup is a man of average height, finely built. His aging skin is well tanned. His face is heavily wrinkled with a number of large moles that he should have had removed. His brown plastic rimmed prescription glasses riding his long curved nose often hide Jacques' almond shaped eyes. His hairline mouth, hidden by a well-groomed moustache and goatee, is often seen with a '*clope*' hanging out from the side. The long light cotton pants, like his maize paper French cigarettes, are a part of him. He lived out his early adulthood in France during the famous 'May 68'. He is very conscious of his indoctrinated religious education, as a Catholic, but pushes it aside while trying to fathom ancient doctrines. He is aware of the conflict it represents, where some of his conclusions may be compromised by his contemporary analytical mind.

By contrast, Professor Abdel-Khaled is short and plump. His bloodline is obviously Arabian. He's a serious follower of the Islamic faith without making a big fuss about it. His hair has thinned. Only a light wisp, covering his polished tanned scalp, remains. His features are sharp. Mahmoud's very broad mouth is never short of a cynical or sarcastic remark. Ironically, in this land of dust and sand, he is the best dressed out of all the people on this dig. His position is reflected in his dress code. White collar means prestige and importance, a residue of the inane British customs that influenced these 'so-called' uneducated cultures. Bigoted tradition has stuck, and surprisingly has not yet withered away. Europe moved ahead, but forgot to drag along their

'long gone' colony cultures. The inane indoctrination stuck in honour of Imperialistic traditions.

Mahmoud has dropped the necktie and this is considered as progress. His UV light-sensitive glasses hide his beady little eyes. Fortunately, Mahmoud's cutting glares are hidden behind the tinted lenses during the long hours of blinding sunlight.

Mahmoud is a pure archaeologist with 'treasure hunt' titillating his insatiable curiosity and ambitions. His lack of interest in non-Islamic dogma is disconcerting. Bigotry is an integral part of Mahmoud's arrogance, and he has no intention of hiding this from his colleagues.

The AJEX personnel remain stuck on site, but now the authority is in the hands of these two renowned archaeologists. Gad's fears came true when they were all informed that they would have to stay put. Now they are stuck for God knows how long.

The big boss, Andrew Johnson, is extremely strict about this. This is his company's discovery and it's not the first time something like this has popped up by pure coincidence. Andrew relies on his own list of contacts to get a team up and running with the full cooperation of the Egyptian government. Egypt will still lay claim on whatever the excavation reveals, but Andrew will not leave empty-handed. He will find the extra money to sponsor the dig, but there will be a price to pay.

The Swiss S.U. Bank, the National Geographic Society and the BBC, thanks to Hal, sponsor Andrew's excavation project. The Egyptian government is happy about the financial support. This is frequent for many of the Egyptian restorations and archaeological projects, but it always comes with a price. The Egyptian economy is not strong and with the Middle East crisis, it tends to ease its own pain by pushing everyones attention outside to that of neighbouring countries. The US uses similar strategies during severe economic flutters. The Egyptian government knows that they will have to rely on international aid for quite some time. 'Compromise' is the bottom line unless Egypt strikes oil, and really big-time.

The Egyptians have continuously negotiated generous deals, where *baksheesh* has always been an integral part of their existence. Andrew dealt his cards, and dealt them well. He is holding most of the major players, but unfortunately he is going to have to sacrifice his exploration team and keep them in place. He's structured his moves bringing in another team to cover the pressing contract that suddenly derailed. When Gad's team stumbled across a new well of treasures, far from the petroleum business, it called for fast restructuring solutions. His commitments are only set back by a month or two. However, Gad's team is quarantined and they are going to have to deal with it for as long as it takes. Their small campsite has expanded considerably.

Sharon is fed up, constantly flying a shuttle service between here and Cairo with Chris. She has little time for Gad. Todd has fallen in love with Marilyn Girradin, Professor Abdel-Khaled's assistant. It was rumoured, by Tom, that Todd was heard screaming out 'Hooray for boobies' – his favourite expression.

Marilyn is French, and having studied in Europe found work in Cairo. Eventually, she decided to stay on marrying into the Egyptian way of life. She is tall and slender keeping her blonde hair tied up in a bun. Very provocative, she likes the way she looks, and loves the way men look at her. Marilyn doesn't go anywhere without her dogs – two very attractive, kind and loving Dobermann Pinscher bitches. Unfortunately their cut pointy ears make them look quite aggressive. For some reason they don't like their master's boss, Mahmoud.

Marilyn is always easy to find – just look for her dogs. Either out on the site, or patiently waiting outside one of the mobile units. They are often dozing in the shade of an open tent where most of the inventory is being handled. Professor Abdel-Khaled puts up with these dogs, as their presence is a wonderful deterrent for the snakes, and keeps uninvited guests away. More interest than this would be pushing Marilyn's luck.

Mahmoud underestimates Marilyn's importance. She is an important link. Like Jacques, she is more dedicated to the historical revelations than the scientific

equations. Her affinity is stronger with Jacques, not only because of their education preferences, but Marilyn admires the humility within the man and his work. But no one really recognises the importance of this trio. These three professionals make up the 'what, how and why', starting with Mahmoud and finishing with Jacques.

Sharon is relieved because Todd has found a new butt to follow around giving her own tight buns a deserved rest, but she doesn't appreciate the way this new, pretty, Marilyn thing looks at her Gad's well-built chassis. Although, she's not that worried, knowing instantly if Gad is interested in another woman. In this case its lucky for him he's not.

Hal is all over his charts again, but this time Doc Pittaloup is leaning over his shoulder. With his broad French accent, he questions Hal over some extremely strange phenomenon.

"What's this central magnetic field concentration? What could it be? And look here, at these four smaller fields, in these outer structures. What are they?"

"Well Doc, the simplest explanation is that they are magnets," he says half jokingly with a broad grin.

"But that's impossible, isn't it? I mean, are there known pockets of magnetic mineral like this?"

"Well no. But on the other hand yes, but they don't appear like this on a scan."

"This has to be one of the strangest discoveries. Nothing makes sense. Four sets of steps that seem to

lead us away from the main chamber, or whatever they are supposed to be. We can't find any remnants of foundation, as if the whole thing was supposed to be buried. And if it was meant to store water, why way out here?"

"Can't answer you, doc, you're the expert. But, I do have a question?"

"*Oui*, go ahead Hal."

"Do you think magnetic fields attract snakes?"

"Err – yes, I see what you're driving at. There are quite a number of the blasted things slithering around. Quite strange! One of the locals bringing in a supply of fresh meat won't bring his flock down here. He stays up – *loin d'ici*, over near his stone animal shelter on the top of the plateau. He told me that this land has been infested with snakes, and reputed as an evil place for as long as his family can remember. Quite uncanny isn't it?" Then the good Doctor drifted off, not expecting a reply. He just enjoys exteriorising his thoughts.

Ibrahim shoots through the door panting, letting in a hot blast of air.

"Doctor Pitta – sir, Professor Abdel-Khaled to see you soon, we discover first statue – sir – come, come."

"Where?" Looking up at Ibrahim he realises his timid friend doesn't understand much. Ibrahim's blank expression reminds the doctor of Marilyn's dogs.

"Okay, take me to the good Professor. Come on Hal, this is a great moment. It may reveal some of our mystery." Doctor Pittaloup looks frail next to Hal. His half-black and half-grey goatee is twitching with

excitement. His Cousteau type nose shines in the heat of the moment, where his small rectangular reading-glasses nearly fall from their perch. He runs his hand nervously through his healthy crop of greying black hair. He immediately lights up another cigarette. The day is already hot and unrelenting.

The team have started their excavations on the smaller outer complexes, due to the accessibility. When they unearthed the steps leading down into the stone ground, it made logical sense that this would be the starting point. They moved the AJEX office trailer sitting atop of one of the stairwells. One of the chocks slipped on the hidden steps. Normally stairs lead somewhere.

“This is extraordinary! At first glance we would assume Egyptian, but the sophistication in the sculpting indicates another influence. Look at the detail in the



Amam or Ammut

crocodile's head, and this has been chiselled out of a black granite block.”

“Amam the devourer!” exclaims the Doctor.

“Yes, it appears so Jacques, but have you ever seen her wearing the horns of Hathor holding the sun, or outside of a tomb for that matter. This is extremely rare and unusual, but it's the sophistication of the craftsmanship that is most disconcerting. I have no idea what period this is, if in fact it's Egyptian.” Mahmoud admits sheepishly and out of hearing range of the others. Jacques looks at Hal. Hal just shrugs.

“Well I was wrong, this has led us further into the dark rather than shedding some light.”

“Who is Amam, doc?” Hal enquires.

“It's a Goddess beast made up of two animals and a reptile. It has a crocodile's head and the mane, just here, of a Lion,” he says, pointing to the representation of curly locks, around what seems to be the broken off ear of a lion. “But until we have unearthed the whole thing we won't know. If it has the rear end of a hippopotamus it is indeed Amam. Just looking at its headdress and a small part of the head, it's difficult to be absolutely positive. I very much doubt that it's an effigy of Sobek. Do you agree Mahmoud?”

Professor Abdel Khaled pouted his broad mouth filling his cheeks with air before answering, “I think the lion's ear and tufts of hair is a fair indication that this is Ammut, as we call her. The God of the waters Sobek would make sense, if this place is a water reservoir, but for the moment we are guessing.”

“And what’s Amam’s or Ammut’s significance?”

“Well Hal, that is a little more difficult to figure out – not its significance, but why it should be found here. Ammut is the ultimate threat to eternal life. She was always present during the burial ceremony as a Goddess of the underworld. She would wait for the results in the weighing of the heart ceremony of the deceased. Anubis would take the heart of the defunct, represented by a pebble, and place it in a balance. Matt would place a feather as the counter weight. The balance was obligatory for entrance into paradise. If the person had been good, they would be set free to taste the pleasures that the ‘after-world’ offered. If they had been selfish and tyrannical, Ammut would devour them, and their wealth distributed among the poor. A little like the concept of Heaven and Hell in the Christian faith, with a little drop of Robin Hood added in,” Mahmoud explains. Hal laughs together with the two specialists, but he’s still curious to ask more, caught in the intrigue of the discovery.

Jacques’ discreet laugh comes from his heart, while Mahmoud’s forced chuckle is loud and very self-indulgent, admiring his own sense of humour.

“You say that this disc is a representation of the sun, but it looks amazingly like the moon by the crater like surface, and this crescent cut in line,” Hal remarks.

Jacques, inspecting the surface replies, “I think the fact that it looks like the moon is a coincidence. I think it is natural weathering. It has been sand blasted

over the centuries. Plus this disc is supported by two horns, which tends to indicate that it is a representation of the Sun. Sekhmet wears a crown of the moon.”

“Who is Sekhmet?”

“Another lion-headed Goddess, usually holding a sceptre with a fan of papyrus. She represents the incarnation of the eye of the sun and the instrument of vengeance. She devours humans who menace humanity and its destruction.”

“Sounds like my first wife!” Mahmoud said, and they all laugh heartily again. Mahmoud puffs out his barrel chest all proud of himself. What he lacks in height he gains in brawn.

“Maybe we should send her over to George Junior if he ever becomes president.”

“It would be a waste of time, Hal, he wouldn’t understand anything.” Again they all laugh.

“You know Jacques, I’m pleased the Egyptian military arrived to seal off this area. I think this is the beginning of a great revelation. Soon we will be pestered by the press and have to deal with crowds of curious people who will try and get a peek at what’s going on.”

“You read my mind Mahmoud.” The three men step back so the precious work can continue.

The evening has closed in tightly around the small group. Sharon’s sits close to Gad with her arm looped through his. Hal and Tom flank Jacques pouring a glass of Grand Marquis red wine. Hal prefers this label to the choice between a bottle of Omar Kayarn or this.

“Cheers!”

“*Santé!*” Jacques replies, lifting his glass and staring at Tom and Hal in a typical French manner. The evening is still young, and even though the air temperature is cool, they prefer to be outside in the fresh air relaxing on comfortable plastic chairs. Hal takes a small tug on his full bent, silver collared *Brugel* pipe stoking on one of his favourite blends of Plum Cake. Hal prefers to smoke from his stubby, straight rose wood *Butz-Choquin* that he has temporarily mislaid.

“As you were saying Jacques!” Hal says placing his glass down beside him on the sandy bed.

“Yes, well most of our history of the ancient Egyptians is built on an overwhelming number of supposition. Some hypotheses are sounder than other ones, but it’s a castle built from a fragile deck of cards. It has to be remembered that one single discovery tomorrow could drastically change our carefully elaborated construction of ancient time. And the unprecedented discovery of this wonderful statue of Amam is one instance that jeopardises the stability of our card castle.”

“This part I have understood, but what I would really like to grasp, is a better picture of how these people lived out their beliefs.”

“Yeah Doc, why did these people go to so much trouble to build these amazing things? Was it just about eternal life, dude?” Gad adds toying with Sharon’s fingers.

“This is quite a complex question. I will try to answer it, but you all have to be aware that a great part of my response is a speculative one, based on the point

of view of someone living in the twentieth century. I've been heavily influenced by my education and my social Christian indoctrination. Taking that into consideration, I personally believe that the first inspiration of the Egyptian people was a response to gratification and the joy of discovering the greatness of life. Discovering that life itself has a direct relationship with the sun, made it possible to build, or structure, philosophical equations around it. The sun is something that is not as tangible as the earth they stood upon, thus it became the perfect object to be perceived as an idol and at the same time a God.”

“Is this their supreme God Re?” Sharon asks.

“Unfortunately you make it sound so simple. Yes the sun is Re, but this is only a small part of it. I would like to add that the sun became the perfect symbol or manifestation of Re. A much more powerful idol than the wooden cross is to the Christian faith – not that they would ever admit perceiving 'Constantine's cross' as some sort of totem. But to get back to the essential, it was the Egyptian’s faith that everything was of a spiritual and religious significance. The Gods were everywhere, in everything, and influencing everything. Spirituality, religion and magic are one, and the word was *Heka*.”

Marilyn joins the group with her two dogs. She pulls one of the spare plastic chairs into the close circle.

“I can see you are getting yourself in quite deep, Doctor! Maybe you could do with some help?”

“*Merci*, Marilyn. It is so difficult to explain the simple that is so complex, and yet simple.”

“That’s contradiction! I like that,” Hal said, taking another sip of his wine.

“Actually I believe that contradiction was one of the important elements in the ancient Egyptians time. Something they wanted to master and harness as a source of life’s force. If everything is *Heka* then everything that happens in their physical world is taken as being a direct manifestation of their God. Thus as ‘life’s magic’ unfolds in the eyes of the beholder these events become the driving forces to worship their Gods, whether good or bad,” Jacques says, confident of his calculated convictions.

“The creative positive part is easier to grasp than its adversary. Don’t you agree Doctor?”

“*Oui!* And the interpretation of ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ is another lengthy debate.”

Marilyn dives into the discussion, “I know, but if we concentrate on the acceptance of opposed forces we can move ahead. Opposites and contradiction are an integral part of the one. This brings us to an interesting point about all the Gods and Goddesses, who are really only deities of the ‘One’. The Egyptians only had one God that manifested itself in many different ways. Monotheism, belief in one God, did not get pushed as a dogma till one thousand three hundred and fifty years before Christ. A failed attempt by Akhenaten.”

“You mean Marilyn, all these animal-headed human type Gods and Goddesses were all the same God?” Tom asks, while rubbing his unshaven chin.

“Well, yes, kind of,” Jacques answers.

“I think I’m stuck on the ‘kind of’.”

“Don’t worry Hal, it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

Doctor Pittaloup continues holding everyone’s attention. “You have to try and see things from a point of view that is very different from the perception we have today. When we started out, in this conversation, we were bordering on a very important question. What provoked the Egyptian people to create? Just the act of creating is a physical expression, a direct link to the fact of existing. This action is part of *Heka* where the results are less important than the act itself. The fruit is just the physical creative expression of a continuum of a flourishing spirit in the body of a tree, where survival itself is a basic creative expression. I think *Monsieur Berger* summed this up very well when he wrote, *‘that an architect who decides on a wall’s upward slope, the sculptor who tames the basalt, the painter who draws a profile, a flower or a bird, the artisan who pegs a footstool, the potter and even the stone cutter all attempt to define not the form, but the idea that is its form, which gives it both meaning and existence. For to create is to give life, and to give life, one must know the secrets that govern the universe, the laws, which ensure the harmony of the cosmos. The artist is thus a priest in that, like him, he knows how to hear the true voice of God’.*”

“So, when the Egyptian people produced monuments, it was not done as an historical document, but as a philosophical perpetuation promoting their religion and need for kingship, which is all a part of the *Heka*. The principals by which they lived were called the *Neter*.”

“Well said, Marilyn!”

“But they considered the Pharaoh a God, no?”

Sharon interjects proudly, but not convinced.

“Again, it is not that simple. The Pharaoh was considered the physical manifestation of a God, as well as the son of Re. Again we see the implementation that ‘everything is everything’. The Pharaoh’s actions, and the way in which he conducted his life, was a direct reflection of the *au-delà* and creation itself. We understand that each of his physical actions were also the same actions on a spiritual level, and the real actions of the Gods themselves. Once again, we interpret that the action is more important than the result of them – although the relationship is obvious. The Pharaoh chooses a woman to bear the next manifestation, and impregnates her. He supervises the birth of the child and its *Ka*. This implies that the king is not just a human being. And, as it was physically impossible for the Pharaoh to be everywhere at once, he assigned delegates that would perform the same ‘life’ ritual as he himself, perpetuating God and his magic force. Sort of a Pope that runs his faith with a whole group of cardinals that represents his actions and convictions all over the world. Unfortunately, this metaphor tends to diminish the uniqueness of the Egyptian’s cult, as the Pharaoh’s role is that of all Gods, including Re the sun’s creator who pilots the solar boat during the day. And Re, in himself, includes Khepri, the scarab pushing the sun into the heavens, God of the morning, and Atum, piloting the solar boat during the evening. The Pharaoh was also Horus God of

kingship, and his direct family also became manifestations of Gods and Goddesses. His wife became Hathor, his mother Nut, and in the Pharaoh’s death he becomes the fate of Osiris and his wife now shifts into being Isis. These equations emerge from observing the costumes and headgear of the royals. So you get the picture that our dear Pharaoh can be any number of deities: from Horus to Atum or Khepri. Do you get the picture?”

“Sounds like bit of a mess, if you ask me, mate.”

Tom says, juggling with the order in the Doctor’s logic.

“I know it sounds terribly complex. I hope we will continue these discussions. I think it’s important that, now you guys are more or less stuck out here, you try to reap something from this extraordinary experience.”

“I’m all for that Doc, but you are going to have to be patient, dude. This stuff is all pretty new to us.”

“I understand Gad, and I will try to be gentle, but don’t forget, much of what I have told you tonight is conjecture based on cards that are quite flimsy, but we do feel confident that we are not too far off from the mark.” Hal reaches into his pocket and hands over the small clay, drinking vessel to Jacques. He had stumbled over it on one of the sand dumping piles, remnants of the excavations.

“*Magnifique!* Where did you find this Hal?”

“Oh, just over yonder. I thought I would rummage through the trash to see if anything was missed.”

“Great find. We’ve found dozens of them. It’s the grail of mankind!”

“You’re pulling my leg. This is the Grail?”

“Remember what we have been talking about.

The Hikaptah Trilogy

This is not your all-famous Holy Grail from Christ's last supper. This precedes that. This is the grail, of all grails!"

"I don't get it!" Hal says perplexed.

"The clay drinking vessel is the symbol that differentiates man from animal. It has to be the very first vessel man engineered – a cup to drink from. Instead of leaning uncomfortably over to take water from a source, like four-legged animals, our hands would form the first vessel to transport water to our mouths. Then came this," Jacques says running his finger around the smooth lip of the bowl, "The grail of humanity. And this grail led to other vessels to carry water over distances, and so on. This is the first vessel. Its importance would be handed down from generation to generation, where eventually Christ would use it, but it was not only his, it's the vessel that represents mankind. It's God's cup and cradle, which has been from the time man was made from clay, just like this original grail was." The doctor hands the wonderful vessel back to Hal.

"Keep it as a reminder of our origins whether it be Egypt, Israel or wherever."

"This part I will remember." Hal says while standing and stretching. Half waving, Hal disappears into the darkness slipping his warm pipe into his pocket. The night has suddenly become quite chilly.

Marilyn's dogs are already sleeping along side her chair. Tom stands up and looks down at the snoozing animals. "Life's a bitch, hey!" He says to the dogs before drunkenly swaying off towards his trailer. But within his mind, Tom ponders over an important issue.

The Discovery

Did the ancient Egyptians have personal responsibilities with a direct line to Re, like the Hindu or Buddha worshippers? Or was the communication link via the elite prophet exchange? Priests holding the unique power to consult with God like Judaism, Islamic and Christian faiths. This common denominator may go further back to the indoctrinated people of ancient Egypt who could only transcend into the realm of God via a powerful charlatan. 'Man's faith is a tragedy', is Tom's final thought on the matter.



The grail of humanity

The Chambers

Only four statues in the east and western stairwells, where it appears that there should have been six. On the right, two of the three buttresses have been left unoccupied. All these black granite statues are crouched, like the famous sphinx at Giza, and their back hind-quarters are definitely those representing a hippo's. This posture is unusual for Ammut, usually depicted standing.

The archaeologists are still confused with the style of expression, which is unprecedented in Egypt's history. They are sure that this whole site is Egyptian in origin. The hieroglyphics, just visible in relief, on the facades of the vertical walls at the bottom of each stairwell, is convincing evidence. The specialists concur that the site has a religious significance, because all the construction is cut from limestone, and not built with adobe brick. Comparing structural elements to the mastaba construction at Saqqara gives weight to their sketchy hypothesis. Dating these remnants will not be rushed. Very small statuettes have been unearthed – charms or amulets (*Wedja*) were left behind to keep evil spirits away. These are typically Egyptian and many of them are effigies of Horus, with their tiny falcon-like heads. Horus is the destroyer of evil forces.

The hieroglyphics insinuate that this is a secret place, not a tomb. Hidden away from temptation, and the curious eyes of the Pharaoh, the true son of Amen-Re, it remains safe. Out of sight from the people and tribes he ruled. Removed from harm's way, and out of reach for



CHAPTER 2 THE CHAMBERS - 1999

Spell 31

*Get back! Retreat! Get back you dangerous one!
Do not come against me; do not live by magic;
may I not have to tell this name of yours to the Great God
who sent you; Messenger is the name of one
and Bedty is the name of the other.*



With four teams working hard, two qualified leaders on each team, the dynamics have changed and the pace is rocketing. They have completely excavated four descending stairwells. The entrances are all bricked up. The sealed-off buried chambers are filled with sand and stone. Six very beautiful black stone effigies of Ammut, three on each side, accompany each stairwell on the north and southern chambers.

those who succumb to the calls of desire. An early-calculated guess placed the site in the fourth dynasty during the reign of Pharaoh Khoufou. Famous for the Great Pyramid, he was more importantly recognised as being the first manifestation born as the son of Re. There is reference to him, but more recent work pushes the site into the sixth dynasty, but nothing is confirmed. There are still mountains of speculation, and hypotheses to be tested. Translations, of what little remains of the relief hieroglyphics, need to be completed. Its religious significance remains unknown and incomprehensible.

The specialists are speculating that the statues are strongly influenced by Asia Minor, the third Akkad Empire of Mesopotamia. It would eventually become part of the Hittite Empire, but this hypothesis relies on dating the site accurately. One mistake can snowball into a multitude of misconstrued notions. The experts are treading carefully with 'could be' and 'may be' being league players at present. Marilyn and Brian consider Greece as another potential source of inspiration.

Doctor Brian Paine is Mahmoud's shadow. He is competing with Doctor Marilyn Girradin, but doesn't consider her a real threat to his ambitions because she is a woman. He's counting on taking the chair when his boss retires, but personalities like Professor Mahmoud Abdel-Khaled usually die before they willingly step down. Lanky mister goody good Brain is a tall skinny fellow that could have easily doubled for Mister Bean,

but more in the vein of the *Black Adder*. Although a Jewish American, Brian has spent most of his professional career in Egypt. He feels it's his second home.

Hal's observation, of some weeks ago, proved to be correct. All the discs worn by the twenty stone statues of Amam have the same type of crescent cut line. This tends to support the supposition that it's a representation of the moon, and not the sun. The supporting horns in this case are presumed to be an element from the divine mother, Hathor. This is still an item of debate, as the sacred cow is directly related to the sun, which provokes subjective reflections about the moon. It's most probably nothing more complicated than being the horns of Hathor holding the discs representing the moon – after all, the moon was perceived as the sun of the night.

Mona's team has marked out a large square of thirty-four and one half metres. It now appears to be an inverted pyramid. They have unearthed a number of foundation deposits in the sandy earth of the four corners. Tiny hand carved models of working tools is typical of the Egyptian's long standing traditions.

The main construction appears to be a step pyramid that has been quarried out of solid rock, pointing to the centre of our planet. This is the initial discovery that Gad and Hal confirmed with the Magnetometer analysis. Brian had mentioned it might have been some sort of quarry for stone. Even though

it is very badly situated. To transport the cut rock from here up the Nile is one hell of a boat ride of about three hundred and thirty odd kilometres. Not that the Egyptians weren't capable.

The Egyptians were ingenious when it came to matters of construction, but how did they cover this inverted pyramid, if it is indeed a roof? There is not one demarcation, other than four well camouflaged drains, to establish that this upside down structure really exists. The waterways run into the depths of the edifice. The Egyptian workers used to these sorts of excavations discovered them. These hidden drains, obscured by cleverly placed natural rock, seem to run down the four-corners to the apex of this eighteen metres deep inverted pyramid, an estimation provided by Tom's report.

Doctor Pittaloup decides to bring in the 'Peanuts Crew' to explore these drains. The leader, Charlie Brown, is responsible for this crew's strange name. Charlie is Todd's half brother, and is married to Lucy Schulz. This was the blow that nailed shut the destiny of using the cartoon term 'Peanuts'. Lucy works with her husband following him and his crew to 'whatever - whenever'. And to reinforce the joke, they nicknamed their computer freak, Abraham Everwitz, Linus. Ron Dainward adopted the initials 'P-P' (Pig Pen) or Slob, which he is. And the final member is Sandra. Obviously they call her Peppermint. It fits perfectly as Sandra continually sucks on Tic-Tacs. If any member of the team changed, no

doubt the new arrival would inherit the sobriquet of his predecessor. It is a tight crew and they have achieved a worldwide reputation in robotic exploration. Obviously they named the robots, from the very first generation to the most recent, Snoopy. It's going to be a couple of weeks before they can fly in, due to other commitments.

In the meantime, the present group is continuing to work on the four encircling structures.

Part of the task force is made up of Nubian folk, just as in the days long past. They are renowned for their hard work. More reliable than the Arabs, and distinguishing coffee coloured features, set them apart from the other locals. Their traditional *galabias* are more colourful than those of the north. Speaking with them, you can still sense faint echoes of resent. Resent that resonates all the way down the Nile, back to the giant effigies of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. Stigmatised by the impropriety of the Pharaohic Empire, the Nubian people have not forgotten. Nubia was a rich source for gold and red granite, and Egypt made sure it was never short of these supplies, wielding a strong military arm of repression and persecution. It's possible, long ago, the Nubians helped build all of this.

It's time to break down one of the sealed entrances at the foot of these strange impressive steps. The thirty-three sand coloured limestone steps lead down to a sealed off chamber. It measures seventeen

The Chambers



Bastet.

point two square metres. A total of two hundred and ninety-six square-metres per chamber with the floor depth at seven metres twenty-six centimetres. There may have been two distinct levels down here.

Prying out the first stone in the entrance, pointing north, proved to be the most difficult. It's so often the case. Both Doctors are present for this major event. Gad stands off to one side with Hal who beams with enthusiasm. Stone by stone, they open the old doorway. Behind this stone seal is another bewildering layer. The entrance is still blocked. Uncertainty ripples through the labourers. They throw worried glances at their boss. Professor Abdel-Khaled, who steps forward to inspect the opening, is not surprised. It is always spectacular to see something exposed after being buried for centuries. Carefully, Mahmoud probes and picks trying to loosen one of the strange clay vessels. He turns to Jacques saying, "Bastet!"

"Are you positive?"

"Well, it looks very much like it."

"What's Bastet, dude? Other than what I call Todd on a bad day," asks Gad.

Smiling Jacques replies, "Cats, mummified cats, to be a little more precise. But I will have to disagree with you. Bastet on a good day and Sekhmet on a bad one!"

"Why pile up a litter of dead cats? And why mummify them?" Hal asks wincing.

"The messengers. These are the messengers that carry the true word over to the world hereafter.

Cats sacrificed and mummified become the Goddess Bastet, the daughter of Re, and Goddess of love and birth. What is important is the fact that they're here. It tends to imply that we are entering a tomb of some sort. Bastet is part of the burial ritual.”

Professor Abdel-Khaled carefully slid out the first of many similar clay urns. The cover seal is very badly damaged. Picking away the little that remained he could slide out the contents. Mahmoud, turning towards the others smiling, easily recognises that it's a mummified cat. Adorned with a badly worn wooden mask of Bastet, and tatty stained crumbling remnants of bandaging, confirms this is a pile of embalmed cats.

“Don't look so surprised Hal, this was common practice. At the beginning of the twentieth century, English archaeologists unearthed so many mummified cats that after sending them back to your homeland, England, they pulverised most of them using them as fertiliser.”

“You're joking of course!”

“No, I am not. It's a fact my dear friend.” Mahmoud adds, “He's right Hal. From one dig, dating to the third dynasty, two thousand, six hundred and eighty-six BC, we dug up around five-hundred thousand mummified ibis in sealed earthenware pots – very similar to what you see here.”

“That's astronomical Professor!”

A total of three hundred and thirty mummified cats are numbered and registered, before being laid out

into individual trays. The best-preserved jars are those lying just beneath the entrance's stone mantle. A remnant of Maât, carved into the headstone, is reassuring. With her wings spread out horizontally, in relief, she portrays truth and justice, protecting what lay beneath her feet – the messengers. Inside these well-preserved jars are hand-painted wooden masks, sitting snug over the heads of the embalmed cats. In an excellent state of preservation, the ornamentation is unusually elaborate.

The clay urns have perfectly preserved these contents. The extremely colourful masks are beautifully crafted. The impressive finds transmit sensational vibes. Workers pass to sneak a look, in awe, at these remarkable effigies. As far as Doctor Pittaloup is concerned, normally, ancient Egyptians did not go to so much trouble, placing sophisticated masks over mummified cats. Jacques and Mahmoud are extremely confused by their observations. What could be so important, especially way out here?

Bastet supports the notion of a tomb, even though many other indicators, like the hieroglyphics, contradict the fact. Both Jacques and Mahmoud are perplexed. Mahmoud has difficulties admitting to his conundrum.

The first space is cleared with the scooping up of the last sand pile. This fill is mixed with orange clay urn fragments (as some had crumbled over the centuries), and the greyish dust of the decaying mummified cats.

The second sealing wall of the deep-stoned entrance is now accessible. There are no clues as to what lies beyond this.

Carefully, the stones are removed. Revealing another large block, this time inside, filling part of the chamber. It appears the chamber has collapsed in, confirming the two doctors' theories. Suddenly, removing the final stone, bones of a human hand appear. A little disturbed by this, Mahmoud sweeps, removing the remaining dust and sand with light wisps of his brush; a small, but meaningful, gesture of respect.

"No mummification here!"

Sweeping under the large stone it's evident that the bones are fractured. The radius and ulna are crushed.

"Personally, Jacques, I think this person was literally squashed to death by this fallen block of rock."

"Accident or premeditated?" Pittaloup asks extremely perplexed.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Jacques. I think we are going to excavate from the top. It was filled in, so lets start at the top and work down."

"We are going to need heavier machinery."

Cleaning the drift sand away from the top area, proving the chamber had caved in, they discover some strange significant facts. The busy Egyptian workers, whose bare torsos glisten in the sun from sweat, define the top edge of a chamber. It was not dug out underground, but cut down into this solid bedrock. However,

this outer rim has a strange inward slope at fifteen degrees. The number of grooves, around the inner edge, indicates a recess to accommodate wooden beams with a cross section approximately twenty centimetres in diameter. The fallen large blocks, amidst this pile of rubble, are two metres long, one-metre sections in height and width, and must weigh about two tons each. Nothing makes much sense to the scientists.

"I think these niches served to fix roof supports. What do you think, Corinne?"

Doctor Corinne Cummings recently joined the team of scientists. She is leading one of the other four groups who are working on the other chambers.

"I'm not sure, Jacques. I have never seen anything like this before. Maybe Mona can help!" She replies, pointing to where Mona is working, while smoothing her tied back, black tight curl (orthodox) hair. Army type green shirt with rolled up sleeves and pockets looking very full over each breast, Corinne blends into this site. She hooks her thumbs into the deep pockets of her knee high shorts while pondering over Jacques' problem. Her heavy boots and thick socks kill any thoughts of seduction. Her Jewish roots are masked out here in this desert. Born of a Swiss Jewish family she does not feel the thwarts of devotion as her orthodox brothers do. She just blends in like a chameleon, where her American English accent camouflages her true colours. She is but one member of the small Jewish community on this particular dig.

Mona approaches, kicking up small puffs of dust. Doctor Mona del Giocondo, an Egyptian archaeologist, flew in with Corinne. Even though Egyptian, with Salem as her maiden name, she married into an Italian family, rumoured to have descendants as far back as the Roman Empire – Roman soldiers who never returned home. Men descended from an invasion that would eventually see the downfall of the Great Egyptian Empire – a turbulent time. These men also saw the coming of Jesus Christ and his one God philosophy. Paganism was going out of fashion. Mona knew that her husband's genealogy did not go back that far, but surprisingly it did go back some five hundred years. Her husband's ancestral family had fled the Sforza political regime of Milan, sharing the same fate as the Medici families in the northern part of Italy. As fabric merchants, the Giocondo family had opted for trying their fortune in Alexandria. As victims of a planned conspiracy, against the wealthy and powerful families in Florence's flourishing economy, they decided to move before life became too sour to cope with.

Mona is extremely good at her job, and very professional. She stays clear of Mahmoud, who resents her becoming a Christian, dropping her Islamic beliefs. This was no big deal for her, but her boss perceived it as defiance and treason, but it is all too late. Mona proved her worth to the Egyptian Institute of Archaeology before she married a Roman Catholic. Mahmoud spat at the news, and their relationship shrank into the decaying threads of a forgotten blood stained Coptic shroud.

Mona arrives just in time to catch Corinne's comment. Corinne continues sheepishly, "and, well, when we started the same work over yonder we discovered the same grooves. I think you're right, supports to fix a roof structure. But why are these four ruins spaced out around the central edifice, and not grouped together? It's as if the geometric positions hold some hidden significance," Corinne says, scraping a simplified plan with her heavy boot in the sand.

"I too am puzzled by this. Do you have anything to add Mona?"

She throws an uncomfortable glance at Mahmoud before shaking her head replying, "no, not really."

"Good, well let's get on with it, shall we?" Jacques said, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead. To let them run into his eyes would sting like hell, "How do you guys stay out in this heat?"

Mahmoud does not acknowledge Jacques' conversation. He turns his back and continues his work, ignoring the presence of the two women. Mona doesn't notice, being so accustomed to Mahmoud's rudeness. Anyway, her intention is to catch up with Corinne. She wants to discuss the most recent discoveries. They both abandon Jacques, leaving him to his thoughts. The further they distance themselves from the men, the more relaxed their conversation becomes.

Mahmoud is adamant. "I think we can reconstruct. I'm sure these stone blocks formed a wall around the edge – foundations of something abandoned?"

Look here, this block has two grooves," he says running his finger down one of them. "They match the grooves on the exterior of the rim, not the interior. I imagine they had some alternative use. What do you think, Jacques?" Jacques walks over to the rim again measuring the distance between grooves. The measurement in the block is identical to his measurement on the outer rim.

"Well the stones were certainly placed around the edge. These measurements confirm it," he said showing Mahmoud the correlation between the two numbers. Mahmoud and Jacques are trying to imagine a wall of stone blocks.

In this harsh climate the arrival of sunset is always a relief for the western workers. As the sun disappears, the long shadows seep into the darkening sand, as the labourers start to drift from the site back to their respective camps. The Egyptian workers live in tents quite close to their military kin, sharing similar accommodations. Fires are soon lit. They will burn through the night till the early hours. The soldiers and workers will cook their meals on them. They also provide warmth during the cutting chill of the evening. The workers mix well and befriend the familiar uniformed personnel.

As the Army is a two-year compulsory part of becoming a man in Egypt, depending on your professional skills, there are often family members somewhere down in the ranks. Relaxing, smoking apple tobacco

through water pipes, and drinking mint tea with pine nuts, forms part of their friendly social rituals. Swilling on local wine is only permitted for the Christian soldiers, but they could all share tender dates and wonderful stories till the late hours.

The familiar sounds of friendly Arabic music with flutes and the soft tapping of drums wafts about in the air warming the hearts of all those sharing this campsite. Some have brought out small radios, but the reception is poor, full of electrical parasites, they find themselves creating their own entertainment.

These cool nights are a time when all the specialists group together and share their future plans and past discoveries. Helping one another, they attempt to build a coherent picture of this extraordinary archaeological discovery. Their presence and vibrant enthusiasm is inspirational to the manual labour work force.

The original group has grown considerably over the last month. The original nine has become sixteen, not counting the work and military forces. Jacques and Mahmoud with their assistants Marilyn, Mona, Corinne and Brian form six of the major players. And now one more has recently been added. Ihab arrived with his large machines a few days ago. Fortunately, they can all still fit into one of these trailer offices. One of which has been transformed into a conference room.

The Hikaptah Trilogy

Karrim prepares bottles of chilled Stella and Meister beer and bottled cold water for their daily meetings. He adds small bowls of nuts, seeds and dates that they can snack on while discussing their progress. A little later he will bring Turkish coffee and a huge hot pot of mint tea. Things are still very sketchy on the historical context. Not wasting time on useless speculation, they tend to plan on how to continue to dig up the past. The story will hopefully fall into place later.

The hydraulic shovel was successful. It has carefully removed most of the stone blocks and rubble from the most northern pit. Having a construction engineer, Ihab Yehia, on hand, is a great asset. Together, with the two Doctors, Mahmoud and Jacques, they are able to establish that these pits were filled deliberately. These piled blocks pushed into these excavations had been stacked three high around the parameter of the dug out chambers. They were once inhabited; but when?

Finding remnants of long wooden beams confirm a type of roof existed. They imagine that brush or branches of date palms lay over the beams to provide shade and protection. These quarters had never been intended to be permanent dwellings otherwise they would have used stone slabs to cover the roof. No slabs of this sort have been discovered thus far.

Many cut out holes, in the surrounding walls, suggest that there were two levels. The specialists,

The Chambers

caught inside their fabrications, imagine a top-level wooden floor in the shade of the palm-covered roof. Ceramic bricks, blackened by soot, indicated the presence of a chimney. Clay pot fragments suggest the stocking of wine and olive oil. The objects are simple and easy to recognise, but the story is not.

Many of the large stone blocks are placed back into their supposed original positions. Ihab's machines have been labouring to reconstruct the site. The result is very impressive, but the final picture is obscure and incomprehensible to the archaeologists.

Evil doings is yet to be disturbed.

The evening's table chat concentrates on anticipating strategies when the work will recommence at the first signs of dawn. This site remains a mystery. The true significance is very vague, as it had been over a month ago. They all share the disappointment that the chambers were filled in with rubble and stone. It has, no doubt, destroyed vital information about the history. Little hope remains that the other chambers will offer up new revelations. This whole place suffers the same fate.

Sharon, in her normal state of curiosity, pops into the mobile conference room. The confined space is full of leisure smoke floating on the cool currents of air from the air-conditioner. Sharon spots Gad. He's down the far end of the trailer chatting to Jacques.

“Hey baby, how they hanging?”

“Fine thanks, and yours honey?”

“I’ll just hang on to the ones I got. Hi Doc.”

“*Bonsoir*, Sharon. Did you just fly in?” Asks

Doctor Pittaloup, while taking another drag on his non-filtered maize paper cigarette.

“Yep, and I just flew a perfect triangle.”

“I’m sorry Sharon I don’t understand,” Jacques wheezes through his nicotine stained teeth.

“A perfect triangle – well as the crow flies as they say. From here to Cairo to Alexandria back to here. It’s a perfect triangle – well almost.”

“Excuse me,” Jacques says, raising his voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen it has just been brought to my attention that we may have discovered a vital piece of information from one of our helicopter pilots.” Sharon blushes.

Weaving amongst his colleagues back to the centre of the table, he stubs out his cigarette and slides the surveyors map out from under the piles of notes. He needs to be able to illustrate and plot the trajectories.

“Look at this, we have a triangle where old Memphis or Saqqara forms the apex, Alexandria the left corner and this place is the right vector. Is this just a coincidence? It does follow the form of the Nile’s delta!” The short silence is soon smothered by a host of chit-chat bouncing back and forth, like a whizzing Super-ball bouncing off the walls of a squash court.

Suddenly Jacques is drawn back to the map. He notes, for the second time, the coordinates of this dig. Logging them in his official report, he’d thought nothing of them, other than a simple expression of the site’s location. He’s a heavy smoker, but it has not dulled his wits. Having to raise his voice again, because of all the babbling, he asks, “Corinne, how many steps down, did you say for each chamber?”

The small crowd calms down instantaneously. This is vital information that nobody wants to miss.

“Well, in the north and southern digs there are thirty three steps. On the east and western sites there are thirty one.”

“Thank you Corinne.”

“Gees, sounds like a damned compass,” Sharon whispers to Gad, but Mahmoud caught the titbit while taking another puff on his short fat cigar. Running one hand through the few silver strands of hair left on his almost baldhead Mahmoud politely addresses Sharon.

“Could you say that again please, Miss Shaw?” His gallantry is tainted with paternalism.

“I said, it sounds like a compass.”

Hal clears his throat from dusty phlegm and blurts out.

“The magnetic fields!”

“That’s correct Hal. It seems we have a giant compass. Look at our preliminary drawings. Observe that the four outer chambers are positioned in relation to the major cardinal points.”

“Yes, but there are magnetic fields in each of these chambers. This doesn’t fit your compass concept,”

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Mahmoud adds with a tone of sarcasm.

“Hal, what happens if you set up magnets around a compass?” Jacques asks, ignoring Mahmoud’s tone.

“Well the compass would be rendered useless, stuck on the same spot not knowing which way to turn.”

“If it is supposed to be a compass it would be one they didn’t want to work,” Brian says, throwing a look of complicity at Mahmoud.

“This doesn’t make much sense at all. So far, we don’t know if the Old Kingdom Egyptians knew about magnetic fields. Astronomy we know about, but using a magnetised needle to navigate – we do not have any proof of this.” Jacques says, placing the drawing over the map lining it to fit the cardinal points. The difference in scale hinders the perception of Jacques’ demonstration.

“Well it doesn’t line up exactly. It’s a few



The Chambers

degrees out. Maybe they were partly guessing.”

“I don’t think they were guessing,” said Mona looking directly at Jacques. “Just south of the site on this ridge here,” she points out on the map, spread out over the table, “we located a stone arc. One of the local shepherds is using it for his sheep. At first I thought it was nothing of interest until noticing a number of unusual markings on the flat stone blocks. They are typical of inscriptions mapping the movement of stars. I have spoken with Corinne about this, and we both concur that it’s an ancient plotter. But what we don’t understand, is that they ignored their data by a few degrees.”

“Eleven point five, to be exact y’all,” Gad says, laying his Swiss knife on the table. It’s equipped with a tiny compass, “See, this site is set up for magnetic north.”

“He has a point, Jacques. Obviously they knew exactly what they were doing,” Mahmoud replies. The thorn scratching his words is provoked by Mona and Corinne’s secrecy. They had not revealed their discovery before this meeting.

“I’ll be a no good, God damned, liver dicked heehaw, them dudes were tight, and bitchin’,” Gad declares.

Brian enlightens them on his knowledge of Egyptians familiarity with magnets. He feels comfortable sharing his thoughts considering himself as Mahmoud’s right hand man. Mahmoud lets him pursue this illusion, but in reality, he has difficulties accepting Brian’s religious convictions. Brian will not debate and irrevocably refuses to acknowledge any links between his religion and the pagan religion of ancient Egypt. He accepts that

the great prophet Moses spent most of his youth as the son of an Egyptian Pharaoh, but more than this he closes the door to debate. Confused about the common links his religion shares with the Islamic faith are enough for him to deal with. Heated arguments push him to avoid this subject. But don't push his buttons unless wishing to endure a bigoted stand on the Exodus. However, Brian is clever, and his experience is appreciated.

"Working in Alexandria, we discovered the Egyptians knew of magnetic material. They'd planned to suspend a statue of a Ptolemy's sister using magnetism in a small bell-roof temple. Unfortunately, they never got it to function, but a group of German scientists studied the theory discovering that it could have worked. But this concept was devised three hundred years BC, not two and a half thousand."

"At least we have a start," Jacques adds.

"This tells us that the Egyptians had notions about magnetic fields at least three hundred BC. It's not much, but it's a beginning," Mahmoud said, still impressed with Gad's quick 'magnetic north' reflex. "But I do not see the connection to the earlier concern about some intangible triangle following the delta. Alexandria was unheard of in the Old Kingdom!"

Brian rubs his chin, and then says confidently, "As strange as it may appear, discoveries of a series of statues and a marker obelisk, all dating from the sixth dynasty, were found near Alexandria. No one has been able to explain it. Doctor Choron put forward an argument that these items had been moved from their

original location, but there is no proof of this."

"Brian, do you think we could get some photos of these objects, as soon as possible?"

"Of course." Brian replies with a coercing grin.

Marilyn, and Corinne have not spoken at all. They stay distant to all these so-called wonderful discoveries, but Marilyn is taking notes for her short bloated boss. Her distance and lack of participation is not because she isn't interested, but due to a direct behest. As a subordinate she is ordered to shut-up and not interfere. This is more than just a social issue surfacing about a woman's status in the Islamic faith, it has more to do with jealousy, and who is the present heir to being the master of Egyptian archaeology.

Marilyn has already discovered a few interesting things, which Professor Abdel-Khaled has either contradicted or shrugged off as not being relevant. Of course, she notices in their evening meetings, that Mahmoud would present her work, together with Corinne's and Mona's, as his own achievements. Tonight is no exception. Earlier she had specifically asked Mahmoud to bring in some equipment to do some close aerial photography. He shrugged off the suggestion, replying that the satellite images will do. The space probe images are fine, but as they are not involved in some sort of covert operation, this isn't really an issue. Part of Mahmoud's perverse perception did not quite see this exploration as it really is.

“Miss Shaw, did you fly in the camera I asked for?”

“Yes I did. I flew it in from Cairo today.”

“Good, then tomorrow we can get started with some aerial shots of this area, including Mona’s sheep shelter,” he adds sarcastically.

“Okay.” ‘Anything you say your royal hyn-arse,’ Sharon adds mentally. She suspects that this short stocky Prof is a bit of a manipulative, macho prick. Like so many of them, they are hard to catch out in their perverse games. Sharon throws a glance at Marilyn. They both share a short friendly smile. They instinctively know something the others have missed. Todd is grinning too. But he’s been smiling ever since discovering Marilyn’s booty. Spotting Todd’s grin, Sharon pokes out her teasing tongue. Todd ignores the cynicism continuing to smile. Now Marilyn has three dogs at her heels.

Jacques is preoccupied with his original line of thought. He lights up yet another French cigarette.

“Brian, what are our figures on mummified cats?”

“One thou’ two-hundred and eighty stuffed pussies.”

Everyone laughs, catching the innuendo, except Mahmoud, who rarely cracks a grin unless it’s his own joke.

“And the break-down?” Jacques insists.

Brian immediately throws out the figures glancing at Mona and Corinne, knowing exactly what Jacques is insinuating. “Three hundred and thirty in the north and south, and three hundred and ten in the east and west chambers. That’s it.”

“Yes, exactly Brian. Three hundred and thirty

stuffed cats, as you put it, and thirty-three steps. Three statues each side of the stairs. On the other hand, we have three hundred and ten cats, thirty-one steps and three plus one statues, all in place. Now look at the map coordinates.” Everyone leans forward trying to get a peek at the map. Jacques’ pencil rests on the exact point.

“Thirty three degrees longitude and thirty one degrees latitude – coincidence? I don’t think so.” A few jaws drop with the realisation that this place is extremely well calculated. One major problem is the latitude-mapping grid. From Copernicus back to Pythagoras 480 BC, it was not put into practise until 1736 by John Harrison, with the establishment of Greenwich Mean Time. These facts insinuate that this site is a devious prank. And even if Pythagoras, who spent twenty-two years of his life in Egypt (ironically treated by the Egyptians as an unwanted Greek tourist) establishing longitude, provokes a drawn out debate on a celestial, or clock inventions, occurring some two thousand years later.

“This is one for Van Doonigan!” Hal scoffs between puffs on his pipe, and they all laugh heartily. Even Mahmoud cracks a smirk while correcting Hal; “Erich von Däniken is his name.”

The strain of a harsh day’s work is tormenting their daily masks. Everyone is ecstatic with these revelations, although scepticism also reigns. The crowd begins to disperse. It’s going to be a very early start in the morning. As usual, there are those who hang on.

The two dogs jump to attention, expecting Marilyn to follow Mahmoud out of the trailer. They growl under their breaths in disappointment.

“Crazy damn dogs,” Mahmoud mumbles staring them down. He flicks the lit butt of his cigar at them, unaware of the large black beetles flying out of the darkness in search of warmth.

“Well, as you said Jacques, one new discovery can shake your stack of cards, dude.”

“That’s right my friends. I am bewildered by these revelations, but on the other hand, well amused.”

“Why do you say that, Doc?” Hal habitually asks.

“Well, the ancient Egyptians were very fond of games and riddles in their philosophy. If my mind serves me well, I can recite part of the *Heliopolitan Creation Myth*, and it starts *Nuk pu kheper em Khepera. Kheper na kheper kheperu, kheper kheperu neb ... err.*”

“*Kheper asht kheperu nu kheperu em kheperu nu mesa, em kheperu nu mesa sen.*”

“Well, well *merci* Marilyn, I am impressed.”

“*Merci*, Doctor.”

“Okay guys, but what does that all bloody well mean?” Tom asks with an air of frustration.

“Marilyn, you can have the honour.”

“*Merci*, Jacques. Translated into vulgar English it goes something like this, ‘It came into being, as the one who comes into being, coming into being as all things which came into being.’”

“A syllogism.”

“Wha-za, man?” Todd asks curiously.

“It’s philosopher’s logic.” The doctor says smiling.

“Dude, what is – what was – what was – what is: there is nothing new under the sun.”

“*Tout à fait*, Gad. A quote from our good book.”

“Yeah y’all, just a little epigram from *Ecclesiastes*. Hal quoted it to me once.”

“Wow! Love it,” Hal said with a broad grin, ticking over the ‘*Life Is Useless*’ parable.

“Wha-za – wha-za – wha-za – wha-za?” Todd repeats laughing. Shaking heads, Tom and Hal chuckle.

“How true this is lads, nothing is new. But it’s not only the riddle, Hal, it’s also the way in which it is written. It’s a giant pun. The description of creation is based on the pun of the divine name of *Khepera* (Khepri). You all remember don’t you? Khepri is the scarab beetle that is a divine form of Re. So it’s not only a riddle, but a play on words, adding another dimension to this poetic myth.”

“Too much!” Sharon says not being able to hold back. “This takes me back to the old white rail days!”

“Wow, multi platform, a bloody head spinner – lots of levels. These guys had the lift going all the way to the top floor!” Tom blurts out almost dribbling onto his sketch block.

“Cool dude!” Gad says grinning.

“*D’accord*, it’s all a bit of a blast from the past, but the Egyptians loved these sorts of word games. Some of them are quite impressive and sophisticated. They not only used the pun of the word, but used the pictogram,

or the hieroglyphics, to reinforce the literal meaning, as well as associating it to an event they wished to express.”

“Hang on there, I’d like an example so I can get my head around this one,” Hal says looking at Marilyn who appears amused by all of this.

“Maybe I can help you, Hal!” Marilyn continues, following Jacques’ lead, “perhaps one of the most simple illustrations of this is how the Egyptians wrote the name of the God Ptah.”

“Who’s Ptah, mate, just out of interest?” Tom couldn’t help himself he had to interject.

“Ptah is one of three Gods that form the Triad of Hikaptah, or more commonly known by the Greeks as Memphis. He is the God of creation and all good things.”

“I thought Re was the God of creation!” Gad says with a frown, while Jacques smiles blowing out a puff of smoke together with a chesty cough. He’s feeling a little off colour.

“Re is, but his role is to pilot the solar boat and be chief of the great ennead. Lord of Heaven and Earth. I’m sorry, please continue Marilyn,” Jacques replies while squashing another butt into the full ashtray.

“Ptah was the Lord of Maat, and of the year, patron of artists and artisans who worked with metal and stone. He was the keeper of time, and he married Sekhmet, the second member of the Triad.”

“Yeah, I remember her. She’s that feline cat sheila, making me fantasise about Nastasia Kinsky,” Tom says eagerly batting his eyelids.

“Hoorah for boobies! I tend to dribble over

Michelle Pfeiffer.”

“Are you a Batman freak, mate?”

“Okay y’all, knock it off, let Marilyn finish.”

“Yes, let me finish. The Triad of Hikaptah consisted of three Gods, Ptah, Sekhmet and their son Nefertem, who was replaced by Imhotep. Imhotep was the great architect of the step pyramid for the Pharaoh Djoser. This is happening around two thousand, six-hundred and fifty years before Christ, in the Third



Dynasty. His fame echoed on through time. He was credited as being the author of the lost *Book of Wisdom*. Because of his reputation, and skills as a craftsman, he was seen as the son of Ptah, thus Nefertem became Imhotep, the great healer. Greek visitors identified him with their own God of medicine, Asklepios.”

“What’s this, a mortal as a God!” Hal cuts in.

“Yes, but only in his immortal form, after his death. He was considered the son of Ptah, which tends to make us think that Imhotep was a mortal manifestation of Nefertem. But, the point I’m trying to illustrate is the riddle linked with Ptah’s written name. There are different ways of writing his name. One particular way is to use the symbol for ‘sky’ representing the ‘p’. The symbol for the ‘earth’, ‘ta’ and taking a picture of ‘heh’, with up-raised arms, who symbolically stands for ‘h’ stuck between the two other symbols. Now, one of Ptah’s responsibilities was to separate the sky from the earth. By placing the symbol of ‘heh’ in the middle, he uplifts

the sky and holds down the earth. Thus one obtains the phonetic spelling of the divine Ptah including a small anecdote about his labours.”

“That is truly amazing!” Hal said, conscious of the astronomical combinations this concept provokes.

“*Oui*, the written word for the Egyptians made it exist, and the spoken word made it concrete. You have to remember that many of the Egyptian people, back then, could neither read nor write, which is why the spoken word is extremely important. The hieroglyphics are the means that would create tradition and a continuum.”

“Can you be a little more coherent, Doctor?”

“Hmm, let me see! The form is symbol, and the symbol is the word. And, as the sage predicted, at the end of a long night, only the word remains: *‘A man has disappeared, his body is dust, his forefathers have returned to the earth; but the word returns him to life by the mouth of he who reads. The word is better than a house of stone, the doors of the western abode; the word is stronger than a fortress, or any army ready for combat.’* All those who have measured the strength of the word shall remain, beyond the stones, on humanity’s lips because the word, the guarantor of existence, is, for them, more powerful than a pyramid.”

“The pen is mightier than the sword.”

“*Exactement*, Tom!” Jacques says contently.

“In the beginning was the word and the word is with God.”

“*Oui, très bien* Gad. You fellows catch on quick!”

“Christ, what was that?” Hal interrupts,

“Something just hit the blessed window!”

“Bugs. You know mate, being attracted by our warm lights in the night,” Tom said confidently.

“Wha-za, they have seen the light, man!” Todd adds, and they all laugh. Jacques, packing up, explains another pictogram, using the word ‘*duat*’ (the realm of the dead), where the hieroglyphic of a mummy, wrapped in the coils of a serpent, illustrates the phonetic sound, together with a description of the after-world’s entrance.

Leaving the conference room, they decide to call it a night.

“Oh my God, what are those things?” Sharon says surprised. With the gas lamps burning, throwing bright warm light, the trailer has become the insect attraction centre of the region.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before Gentlemen,” Hal says walking over to get a closer look.

“Jeez-us, don’t touch ‘em Hal, never can tell – might be nasty buggers,” Tom shouts, surprised at the number of large grotesque beetles scratching around in the reflections of light on the shimmering aluminium.

“They’re some sort of stag or rhino beetles – big ones at that!” The horrible buzzing noise of beating wings is disgusting. Suddenly one flies straight into Hal’s face.

“Sh-ugar!”

“*Mon Dieu!* These are big insects. And look at the beady red eyes! Never seen anything like this before!” Gad, stepping towards Jacques, hears a small pop and crunch under foot. Looking down, ugly black beetles scuttle in all directions, invading the whole area.

“Shit, dude, wanna count these sonsofbitches!”

There's a damn shit load!"

"*Kheper asht kheperu nu kheperu em kheperu nu mesa, em kheperu nu mesa sen.*" Marilyn says grimacing. Her ugly expression matches the hideous beetles.

"*Oui*, but Khepri is a dung beetle," Jacques replies, frowning.

"Tell them that!" Marilyn retorts, pointing to one nasty critter clinging to the back of a white plastic chair.

"Let's get outta here, man. Wha-za!" Todd snaps brushing a bug off Marilyn's woollen protecting shawl. It's claws grab Todd's finger and pinch. He flicks the ugly thing off, "Crap!" It leaves two small red puncture marks. Marilyn shivers. They head off into the safety of night, a darkness that will eventually turn them mad.

The fires diminish to scarlet red glowing coals breathing in tune with the light breeze. The night air is cold, with a razor cutting edge. The barren landscape has turned from molten gold into a black icy cesspool – a petroleum speculator's dream.

The black beetles invade the site looking for warmth to help run out these long dark hours. They shuffle and hide their transparent wings under their hard carapace covers. Something has drawn them in, and it's not only the light's warmth. It's also the scent of a long lost friend promising them a fine harvest.

Hal rests his head against his pillow floating on a passage from *Exodus*: '*There will be so many that they will*

completely cover the ground. They will eat everything that the hail did not destroy, even the trees that are left. They will fill your palaces and houses of all your officials and all your people. They will be worse than anything your ancestors ever saw.' Now sleep, dimming his thoughts, carries him off to another brighter world. His mental paradise doesn't last long. Suddenly it takes a quick plunge into Hell.

Gad sits straight up in bed soaked in feverish cold sweat. His mind wanders, tripping over the fresh nightmare. Covering his face, he can still hear victims' screaming. Workers squashed under the falling stones. The silent crushed bodies lay in bloody pools of broken bones and torn flesh. A hand still twitches. The last electrical impulses are fading. The victim's heart is flat lining. The twitch desperately beckons him to run for his life. Suddenly, the limb turns pitch black, infected by some ugly disease. The reaching hand sinks into a black sea of red-eyed creatures and insects. These vermin roll over each other in ecstatic bliss. Gad's nausea bites into his disturbed mind.

Looking across to where Sharon lies, Gad worries he may have disturbed her. Lightly snoring, her pupils continue to dance under her eyelids. 'Dude, I hope her dreams are better than mine,' Gad wishes.

Sharon is out on a gig with black ravens. Their audacious red eyes unnerve. The sounds of their raw penetrating caws are nauseating. They stalk

the night killing small creatures. With bloody beaks they smile at Sharon's ignorance. They feed on her fear and dream of scavenging on her offal. They wait patiently for their prey to fall into the depraved depths of the great black abyss. Only the lost souls' red eyes reflect deceit. She runs, but they swoop haunting her vain attempt to escape. They desperately want to lay the timeless egg guaranteeing procreation. The black crows melt into this evil darkness' greed.

No one sleeps particularly well this night.

Ugly black diesel fumes spew into the air, as the hydraulic shovel's motor breaks the silence of the dawn-ing day. Ihab Yehia's workers already have harnessed another large stone, and are ready to remove it.

Marilyn's dogs sit on the edge of the helipad keeping a close eye on Sharon and their master. Finalising the cables from the digital camera, connecting the laptop, will only take a few more minutes. Sharon is happy to be working with Marilyn. She's busy confirming her suspicions about Marilyn's prick of a boss.

"This is your idea, isn't it, Marilyn?"

"Yes," she replies timidly.

"Well fuck him, hey!" And they both giggle.

"You are extremely beautiful when you smile. Do this more often." Sharon articulates, reducing her rapid firing of words to accommodate Marilyn's English comprehension. English is Marilyn's third language.

"Thank you, I would like to, but with my boss it's quite difficult." Marilyn's French accent adds another delicious flavour to her natural charm. "Oh, and I'd really like to thank you for flying in my bicycle yesterday."

"That's okay. I couldn't miss it. There was this poor Arab man holding it, as though it had some sort of disease. I doubt he's ever ridden one."

"That's Shaba. He's a funny man."

"Let's get this show on the road then! I'm really happy we're working together on this."

"Me too," Marilyn says slightly blushing.

"I'm surprised that Todd is not here hitting on your cute booty."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand!"

"You know, hanging out – he is often with you."

"Yes, I know, and he's interesting. I like him."

"I'm pleased. Whoops, I spoke too soon!"

"Wha-za, guys, can I come for the ride?"

"Only if you sit in the back and help Marilyn."

Todd is beaming at the thought.

"Don't pester her either – I said help her."

With the helicopter's rotor blades picking up the beat, the two dogs understand they'll be left behind. They run off to find better games to play, avoiding choking on the wild eddies of dust. The two bitches are full of energy in the morning. After finishing on the higher land, sniffing around fresh sheep dung, the bitches run all the way back down to sit on the piled stone blocks.

One shepherd is still running his sheep, but away from this snake invested low land. His curiosity in the site's development creates opportunity, and it's paying off. He befriends Karrim who asked him to supply meat. A source of fresh nutriment is a valuable asset. Mutton is an important part of their diet, helping to feed this growing population. Meat has to be fresh, and the animal must be slaughtered by having its throat cut.

The dogs are happy with a continual supply of juicy bones to gnaw on, and then hide. Returning from their own little burial party, they lay to watch the huge hydraulic shovel workout. Jacques and Mahmoud both arrived in time to see the mechanical beast in action. Standing off to the side they allow the noisy machine to do its job. Cleo starts barking, looking down into this six-metre deep pit. Patra joins in.

"Damn dogs," Mahmoud shouts over the top of the roar of the diesel motor, while picking up a small stone. Throwing it at the dogs, they shy away for a second or two, and then start in again. Lucky for the dogs Mahmoud is a poor shot.

A sudden cry from below causes Mahmoud to snap his attention away from the dogs instantaneously.

"*Eda watz?*" He shouts in Arabic.

"Bones! Lots of bones."

All the workers stop immediately. The big shovel breaks into an even idle. Taking the stairs, Jacques and Mahmoud run down into the pit. Another stone has

already been harnessed ready to be pulled out.

"Take this up," Jacques says signalling the driver of the heavy vehicle. The cables are already attached to the shovel's long hydraulic arm. The stone gently moves, taking up the strain, and then rapidly disappears into the air. Bones and more bones come to light. The more stone and rubble they remove, the more evident it becomes they are standing in a massive grave.

The helicopter can be heard flying over. Mahmoud looks up for a second, happy that Marilyn is off busy elsewhere, and out of the way. Slipping on gloves, Jacques and Mahmoud start to carefully pick over the fragile remains, while the others set up a cord grid sectioning off this new development.

"Crushed. They were all crushed to death."

"I don't think this was an accident. I think we'll discover the same atrocity in the three other chambers."

"Do you think that it was some sort of sacrifice?"

"Could well have been, Jacques – could well have been, but for the moment the reason eludes me. These blocks were levered – pushed into this hellish pit, killing those trapped down here. This is a slaughter house."

Some of the more professional helpers are brought in to work the grid. Sifting through the remains, piecing together what they could, they try not to disturb the ground with their clumsy feet. Again plastic trays are used to carry away the bones. Later, Marilyn will try to piece together a story of what happened.

Carefully placed planks provide secure paths. The workers, including Mona, Corinne and Brian, now wearing gloves, paper suits and masks, uncovering some of the buried skeletons. Their protective accessories will minimise the risk of contamination. They are hoping these bodies will reveal the 'who' and 'where' questions from the DNA analysis they are intending. Some of the freshly uncovered remains are bagged immediately, and then placed into the preparatory trays. The fortunate part of this discovery is, the extremely hot and dry climate, the sandy beds, provided ideal conditions for natural mummification. Skin and decayed muscle still partially cover groups of skeletal bodies. These specimens will be sent off to the osteology laboratory in Sanders Bay, Canada. Doctor Eldon Molto from the University of Lake-head will do the DNA analysis on these unique samples.

Jacques returns to the pit, leaving the hoard of plastic boxes filled with gory remnants behind. He picks over what's left of this bizarre holocaust. Scooping up some strange material, he bags it for analysis. The small fragments of charcoal and ash confirm old fires. Happily scratching around he discovers ancient metal tools, and a thick-walled stone vessel with a lip, a *cruset*. The kind used in pouring molten metal. Remnants of other wooden handled tools appear sporadically. Sweeping away, layer upon layer, of invading sand and dust, more of this sordid story surfaces. Ceramic fragments and other broken daily utensils are found. Unfortunately many objects have been badly damaged, bent and

deformed from this cave-in. Hal created an amusing quip, calling it 'a heavy shower'.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Jacques stands up. Looking around, the puzzle fragments start snapping together forming a coherent picture. Unconsciously he mumbles, "Workshop – this is a workshop of some kind. Maybe working metal!" The answer has been riding with him all along. "But why? Why out here? It doesn't make any sense." Looking over towards Mahmoud he decides not to call out. His colleague is very busy punching out orders at the workers. Mahmoud's condescending opinion is obvious, considering them inferior and incompetent.

"Well, he promises things, and then, when the time comes, he conveniently forgets he pledged anything. He denies everything, making me look foolish, as if I was plagued with some sort of schizophrenia." Marilyn says into her little microphone. Her earpiece replaces the clumsy, heavy, uncomfortable headphones. But she'd stupidly forgotten how noisy these helicopters really are.

"The man is just an arsehole, Marilyn! Keep away from him." Sharon says with an experienced woman's tone. She'd known quite a few in her day. Snapping back from her mental list of creeps, she steadies the chopper.

"Well, at the museum it's OK. I have my own office and he leaves me alone. He gives me all the shitty assignments, ones he can't be bothered with. Doesn't even care to find out if anything interesting came from

them. But I love my work. Oh, can you steady it here?"

"Gotcha."

After taking a few shots, including Mona's astro-observatory, very impressive at this height, Marilyn considers her job done. Suddenly she catches a glitch.

"Sharon, swing us slightly to your left."

The chopper follows Marilyn's command.

"Well I'll be!"

"Wha-za?" Todd asks looking in Marilyn's direction. He doesn't spot anything out of the ordinary.

"Look at the vegetation!"

"What about it, man? It's like this everywhere – damn scarce, you know what I'm sayin'!"

"Look at the way it has grown!"

"Sorry, not with you, sweetie."

"Do you see it, Sharon?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, other than one sporadic line of weed."

"Yes, indeed. The occasional shrubs line up."

"So what, man! That's no big deal."

"Oh, yes it is. It may be a covered canal."

"What sort of canal?"

"A water channel, the Egyptians built underground canals near oasis – water catchments."

"Sharon, can we follow it please? I want to photograph the whole thing, if possible?"

"No probs. And if this is anything important I won't let your boss take the credit, I'll make sure of that."

"You're very kind, but you don't know my boss, not as well as I do. Don't bother yourself, or you may

discover you don't have a job any more. He can be very mean and persuasive."

"Don't worry sister, I can look-out for myself."

Sharon replies swinging the helicopter around slightly. Lining it up with the vegetation, she follows the bush.

Mahmoud spots the helicopter heading off.

"Joy riding again, as if nothing better to do," he mumbles under his breath. He glances over to the dogs, but they lay low in the shadows cast by a wall of piled stone. Still wide-awake, alert, they look down at Mahmoud knowing something that he doesn't. Mahmoud is angry allowing these stupid jackals to intimidate him. '*Yalla ya hara*', he thinks to himself.

Happy about being in Marilyn's company, Cleo and Patra, sit in the rear compartment, enjoying a new view of dust clouds, being swept into the air from the speeding land-cruiser. She and Sharon are heading out into the desert again, out of Mahmoud's way. A few days have passed since they surveyed the area with digital camera images, allowing Marilyn to study the prints of the 'Bush Boulevard', which Mahmoud has no time for. Sharon is navigating. Marilyn has pinpointed two areas to explore. This is Sharon's day off, but stuck out here, what do you do with your spare-time? She decides to help Marilyn.

The dogs are happy to run around exploring, sniffing out trouble. Poking around at old sheep

droppings, or toying and barking at an innocent looking scorpion. The dogs instinctively know that the creature's sting is trouble. From the lack of other things for them to play with, this will do. Marilyn walks directly over to the low bush vegetation, and then follows the line. She comes upon a decent sized boulder appearing to have been placed by man rather than nature. She is determined to shift it. Backing up the cruiser, Sharon ties the thick nylon rope around the girth of the rock. Attaching the other end to the tow bar. She signals Marilyn by tapping on the back window of the tailgate. Not wasting time, Marilyn drops the clutch and the stone rolls out of its nesting place. It reveals a rectangular shaft.

"Wow look at this! This is great!"

"Is this what you have been looking for?"

Sharon asks looking down the black well.

"Just as I expected. This is a shaft mined out by Egyptian workers during the construction of this canal. This is really man-made – I can't believe it! These shafts would be used as a ventilation system – you know – air vents, and to evacuate the rock and rubble they'd dug out. We should be able to locate many more of these quite easily. Quick, I have to get my camera."

The canal was never used for water, but a passageway, as Marilyn will eventually discover. But she never discovers a junction with a second passage leading to the temple of Seth, down nearer the sea. The ocean claimed part of the temple complex a very long time ago. Fortunately many things remain buried.

Sharon is happy for Marilyn, who is busy trying to keep her dogs back from this new discovery. They had lost interest in the confused scorpion. Getting them to sit is an impossible task. Sharon releases the large rock from its bond. They will use the rope to descend down the narrow shaft. It will be a tight squeeze. Backing up the Toyota, Sharon uses the tow bar again, but this time as an anchor. Taking the two emergency lamps, they had lifted out of the mobile offices, they climb into their make shift harnesses. Sharon put these together from spare security belts in the chopper. They salvaged some nylon rope, carabineers and pitons, gloves and a couple of helmets from the AJEX material depot. The dogs are nervous watching Marilyn dressing up in this weird gear.

"You know what the worst part is?"

"Tell me Marilyn, before it's too late."

"Well, apart from the worry the roof may cave in, you have to worry about snakes."

"Oh shit, its home away from home, is it? Snakes! I hate creepy crawly snakes."

"I noticed, but they love these sorts of places."

"Okay, what sort of snakes?"

"All sorts, from small vipers to large cobras – this is Egypt after all."

"Tell me! Can't we take one of the dogs with us?"

"No, we'll have enough to worry about than trying to find a lost dog. They'll leap ahead sniffing out trouble, leaving us alone anyway."

Sharon looks a little worried. She hates anything that slithers, including people like Mahmoud.

“Come on Sharon, I thought you were a woman that can hold her own?”

“I don't care if the dogs go AWOL, they'll keep the snakes away! I hate creepy crawly beasts. It's bad enough back at the base – they're everywhere!”

“Oh, come, its not that bad. You're a brave girl.”

They climb down the small three metres deep shaft. Fortunately both these women are slender.

“Oh my God, I'm six foot under and feel good about it. Well, a little spooked, but Okay.”

Marilyn smiles while shinning her light onto the rough-cut walls of the canal. Cautiously they venture further down the dark passage, just a few dark metres.

“Gee, this is really exciting. Here, hold my lamp.” Fumbling around Marilyn manages a few good photos. Sharon profits, looking at a short well-lit snippet of information in the sporadic flashes.

“Oh my God!” Suddenly she feels a pop and crunch under foot. Pointing Marilyn's light she notices a yellow pussy mess stuck to her boot, with a few large black beetles, like the ones that had greeted them that eventful evening. The familiar shape of a snake slithers into the light, chilling the moment.

“Oh, crap!”

“What is it, Sharon?”

“A freakin' snake!”

“It's just a cobra. Keep perfectly still.”

“Oh my God, just a cobra! I can't run even if I want to.” Sharon feels the thing slither over her boot.

The sensation writhes all the way up her spine ending on her itchy nose.

“God I hate snakes,” she says, under shallow tight breathes. A one-hour minute slides by.

“Do we have to do this?”

“Well I do, but you're welcome to quit if you like.”

“No, I ain't going nowhere alone down here.”

Sharon replies, scratching her nose.

The dogs are barking. The noise is almost deafening, echoing off the walls in this pitch-black tunnel. The amplified sound happily bounces off of the rock.

“I think the cobra just passed the shaft. Cleo got a whiff off it.”

“Gees, don't your dogs know that sound can set off avalanches and cave-ins, for Christ's sake.”

“Well Sharon, you'll be happy to know that I've seen enough, we can quit.”

“Hey that's the best news I've heard since setting foot down here. One small step for man, but a bloody giant leap, in my case, out of here. Next time remind me to wash my helicopter, or do some sewing on my day off.”

“Do you sew?”

“Are you kidding! The only needle I can thread is the one Gad's wearing.”

Sharon is obviously happy to be topside. Marilyn laughs at Sharon's joke, because of the French expression '*enfiler*,' but she doubts Sharon knows about this, but then again.

“Hey, did you hear Tom's joke about the two

guys travelling out in the desert?”

“No.”

“Well one of them needed to take a crap. He found a great spot near a fallen tree where he could wedge his booty in one of the dry forked branches. Just as he was dumping, a startled snake slipped out from under the tree and bit our dear friend on his limp thing.”

“Ouch!” Marilyn cries, thinking pain.

“He shouts out to his friend, *'use the radio – call a doctor, or the police – find out what to do.'* His friend calls. Still on the radio he shouts back asking his friend if he saw the snake that bit him? He replies; *'Yeah I did, it was black with red on its belly.'* The doctor explained that it's a very venomous snake. He will have to suck the wound or his friend will die. His friend calls out; *'What did he say? 'He says you're going to die'.*”

Marilyn laughs shaking her head. She wonders where Tom gets all this corny stuff, and decides to ask.

Sharon replies, “Tom's Australian, they're born with joke genes. By the way, how's your stomach?”

“Shit. How's yours?” Marilyn replies.

“Crap, just like my nightmares.”

“You too.” This is all Sharon reveals.

Closing the dogs into the back, both women are relieved to be back in the cruiser heading off.

The canal heads straight towards the small village of *Rummanah Biral Abd.*

“I don't think we'll have to go down another shaft – well not today.”

“That's comfortin'! Once a day is quite enough.”

“And, I'm not sure this channel is a canal.

It could be a passage.”

“Oh my God, secret corridor stuff, tight!”

“I enjoy your imagination, Sharon.”

Sharon just smiles, happy sharing this very special moment.

Marilyn suddenly thinks about the local folk. They are approaching the small town.

“It would be good if we put our turbans on.”

“I thought the Egyptians are not all that strict with the 'wearing of veils' stuff.”

“Well they're not, but out here let's not take things for granted. If we can avoid offending these people we have already open the door for good communication, don't you agree?”

“Putting it like that – yes I do. And I thought you were just hot.”

“Well, we have both been pleasantly surprised.”

Starting her wrapping process Sharon couldn't help herself.

“Aint we just an Arab's dream, Marilyn!”

“What do you mean?”

“A Toyota Land Cruiser full of hot bitches,” and they both laugh. Cleo and Patra are busy watching the brown clouds swirling around outside the back window, oblivious to a black future swelling up out of the past, like fine dust.

The Hikaptah Trilogy

As the dust settles, after a long day of being tormented by man-made contraptions, it welcomes the setting sun. The intrepid night stalks in from the east stealing the little light that's left. But the night is not the only thief active, pending the daunting dark hours.

They carefully wrap each precious object in bubble plastic assuring a safe passage to Cairo. These items were never tagged, missing the inventory process. They fell through the cracks in space and time, while the vigilant eyes are distracted, into the slippery hands of artful dodgers. The items go missing, vanishing, as though never existing – impossible to find. Now, it will become even more impossible to discover them, as distance grows together with traceable trails.

The wooden chest is nailed shut and bound in metal ribbon. Joining the others like it, the shipment will all be flown back to the capital, but one particular crate will remain in transit. It's final destination, Corridor 17, in Geneva Free-port. This is a wealthy reunion of unique looted treasures representing great fortune, what 'neutral' Switzerland is eminently famous for.

